

Kombucha beverages quench thirst for wellness at foodservice programs

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Tara Fitzpatrick 1

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Beverages for the new decade must do more than quench thirst. More than half of consumers look to beverages to play an important role in their health and wellness. According to a beverage culture report by the Hartman Group, 62% expect their beverage to nourish and expand on their well-being and quench the thirst for “higher-order motivations” like “connection and care,” the report finds, with “teas and emerging categories like kombucha.”

“Consumers are switching to healthier diets, which is fueling demand for fermented products,” says Nadia Jackson, Sodexo Culinary Solutions director of retail excellence for North America. “They are increasingly seeking out beverage options that have lower sugar, clean ingredients and functional benefits. Fermented foods have versatility to suit various diets including veganism, lactose-free, gluten-free, clean eating and plant-based.”

Stanford University makes use of the California produce that’s so abundant—ugly fruit and all. That imperfect produce has become the perfect ingredient and sustainability tie-in for the batches of kombucha made by the dining team.

“One of the more fun things we’ve done is connecting our Deliciously Imperfect program with kombucha,” says Erica Holland-Toll, executive chef of Stanford Flavor Lab. “We got a shipment of amazing peaches from a small farm, a one-off 200-pound crop, a very delicious variety that’s very tender but bruises easily, and they were so ripe we couldn’t get students to eat them fast enough.”

So, gathering up the bruised-but-still-delicious peaches, the dining crew peeled them down, braised them and then made Gold Dust Peach kombucha, which was served in shot glasses to about 1,000 students at the Tasting Table, a place for sampling and learning about cool new foods.

Imperfect apples also led to perfect kombucha, “fall distilled into a glass...so delicious,” Holland-Toll says. “We helped out a local farmer by taking a pallet of apples that had some minor scarring due to a late-season hailstorm.”

Working with living organisms to make kombucha has been a gateway for both the dining team and the students they serve.

“Kombucha led us down a rabbit hole of fermented beverages,” Holland-Toll says. “The one we’ve been playing with currently is called a ginger bug. It’s ginger, sugar and water that is fed, similar to a sourdough starter, over a week or so, strained and then used to inoculate fruit juice. It consumes the sugar in the fruit juice and creates CO2 for a naturally sparkling, probiotic-packed refreshing beverage. We’ve made apple, grape, mint and strawberry flavors so far.”





Locally brewed kombucha is the perfect beverage for the Taste of Vermont event at UVM.

Down the fermentation rabbit hole

Stanford is also home to the Microbiota bar, a concept devoted to gut health-promoting menu items based on the study of the microbiome, the trillions of microbes living in each and every one of us, and how it affects every aspect of health. An example of a menu item there is a soba noodle salad with kimchi vinaigrette and edamame.

“Fermented foods have a signature tangy flavor that foodies love and are filled with gut-healthy probiotics so they check both boxes,” says Scott Gingerich, Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants’ SVP, restaurants and bars, who recently contributed to Kimpton’s annual Culinary + Cocktail Trend Forecast for 2020.

In addition to predicting the rise of nutritional yeast, schmaltz, s’chug and whisky highballs, Gingerich is expecting the proliferation of fermented foods into the new year.

“We’ve seen this trend expand beyond the traditional yogurt or pickled vegetable,” he says. “For example, tempeh and kimchi have been popular ingredients in many of our restaurants’ dishes. Taking it a step further, fermented hot sauce and fermented chili peppers have become popular add-ons, packed with flavor and depth... giving a dish some unique heat.”

Photo: Concord grape is just one flavor of kombucha created by the Stanford Flavor Lab.

Less soda, more 'bucha on board

The Washington State Ferries, part of the Washington State Department of Transportation, carry tens of thousands of people every day from 20 terminals around Puget Sound and the San Juan Islands. Those people are looking for better beverages, says Centerplate General Manager Rich Welfringer.

“We get a diverse crowd and there’s an emphasis on people wanting less soda pop and more options,” Welfringer says. “So we wanted to refresh our kombucha line and please as many people as possible.”

Last summer, new kombucha offerings came on board from Kombucha Town, a local brewer out of Bellingham, Wash. Flavors include Cascadian hop, green jasmine, blueberry white, lavender and guayusa mint. Kombucha Town comes in cans, rather than the more traditional glass bottles, since the cans are easier to recycle, Welfringer says.



Local for the win: 'BlueBernie,' Strawberry Sage and Turmeric Sunrise at UVM

An example of using a sense of place (and a sense of humor), one of the kombucha flavors at The University of Vermont (UVM) is BlueBernie, named for the state’s most famous politician.

This semester, UVM’s Sodexo dining team began offering Aqua ViTea, locally brewed kombucha in a rainbow of flavors. It’s already been outselling a national brand of kombucha, says Marissa Watson, Sodexo sustainability manager at UVM.

“The company is awesome in terms of local sourcing. A local artist designs the labels, and we’ve done a couple of tabling events with kegs and they’ve been very well received,” Watson says. “Some students don’t drink alcohol or coffee, so it’s a nice alternative. Off-campus, I know some bars are serving kombucha as a mocktail.”

Photo: Gonzaga can provide kombucha on the go with this portable tap system.

What’s on tap? Kombucha, of course!

Gonzaga University, being a Jesuit school, has a list of higher-order values in its mission statement, including caring for the planet, the community and the students.

“When we’re thinking of health and wellness and we’re talking about how do we contribute to that part of a student’s journey on a daily basis, we look at that as an opportunity,” says Pat Clelland, Sodexo regional district manager at Gonzaga. “And we looked at what we can do to support the local economy and found Bare Culture Kombucha.”

A rotating selection of four flavors (cherry-orange-grape is the most popular) from Bare Culture is found at Gonzaga’s Marketplace c-store, and Clelland has been able to develop a cool mobile kombucha tap system that works as a catering and farmers’ market pop-up.

"It's just like in a bar," Clelland says. "But it's in a cooler (a low-boy) about 3 feet tall and 3 feet wide. Inside are quarter- or eighth-kegs and a little CO2 unit with the taps on top." Housed in a reclaimed wood frame to create a small kiosk, the look is rustic and artisanal.



Centerplate's foodservice operation aboard the ferries that help millions of Seattle residents commute each day has opted for cans of kombucha instead of glass to be recycled more easily.

Innovation with kombucha

Sodexo Senior Director of Culinary Innovation Kevin Cecilio has several batches of kombucha bubbling away at the moment at the company's Innovation Center, using juices and purées to come up with new flavor profiles.

"The weird ones are the best, and ginger or cayenne is great because the spicier the better," Cecilio says. "Citrus is easily meshed with the sourness of kombucha, but the secret ingredient is berries. I know it's a little more expensive, but if you add blackberry juice, that comes out really cool."

Cecilio's favorite unexpected use of kombucha? As a brine for proteins. He expects kombucha to stick around as a trend, and he's on-board, microbiome or not. "I'm not a nutritionist, but I do know kombucha definitely does two things," Cecilio says. "It provides hydration and it provides a substitute for sugary soft drinks."

How safe is it to DIY kombucha?

One last note: There is some risk for making in-house kombucha. "Fermentation is just when some kind of microbe...yeast or specific bacteria is used to metabolize or to consume sugar and have it produce some kind of acid, alcohol or gas," Metropolitan State University of Denver assistant professor of chemistry Ethan Tsai told the *Denver Post*. "We've harnessed [fermentation] to do a lot of work for us."

It gets dangerous when, Tsai says, in trying to get a microorganism to work for you, it goes with the territory to provide an attractive environment for other, less desirable microbial life. Tsai's advice is to sterilize jars and lids. "The law of the land is cleanliness is godliness."

Contact Tara at Tara.Fitzpatrick@informa.com

Follow her on Twitter [@Tara_Fitzie](https://twitter.com/Tara_Fitzie)