Where's My Kombucha?

An Interview With Synergy's GT Dave

by Sharon Hall

Ever since I discovered GT's Kombucha — my favorite is Gingerade — I have been hooked. The kombucha fungus is not a mushroom, as it is sometimes thought to be. The scientific term for it is SCO-BY—which stands for a Symbiotic Colony of Bacterias and Yeasts. A mass is affectionately called, "the mother." Little scoby offshoots are"babies." Last summer found me gifted with one of those babies, making kombucha at home. The odor of the new culture reminded me pleasantly of apples: I found the whole process, although time consuming, highly satisfying. I wrote loving intentions on my kombucha jar and let it sit in a coolish corner while it turned itself into a wonderful, effervescent, non-alcoholic, health-supporting elixir.

If one takes time to read the fascinating label on a bottle of GT's Kombucha, you may discover that the delicately fermented "tea," originated hundreds — maybe thousands — of years ago in China. You will also learn about the founder, and that he started bottling it after his mother seemed to benefit from his homemade variety during her bout with cancer.

GT Dave with his mother.

One of the reasons kombucha is so beneficial and enjoyable is because, like yogurt, the drink contains living organisms called "probiotics". The word comes from the Latin "pro," meaning for, and "bio," meaning life. We all know these bacteria can help make our gut happy and a happy gut is a happy body, but here's the rub; living organisms have their own agendas. This makes their behaviors less consistent then say, a box of denatured rice, or shelf-stable, sugar-coated wheat flakes. These living, messy, chaotic but necessary organisms and their activities in kombucha, a raw food, are what led GT Dave and his company into frustrating new territory.

One day last month, I walked into my local store and discovered GT's Kombucha was gone from the shelves and no one knew when it was coming back. Strange rumors about high alcohol content were voiced, and other much less desirable fermented beverages in glass bottles were suddenly popping up on the same refrigerated shelves where my beloved GT's Kombucha used to sit. And, all this had happened without any warning over a week or two. That's when I began to get worried. Where was my kombucha?

I had to find the real story and what better than to ask the man at the center of the storm? Lucky for me, G.T. Dave is a lovely man with a big heart. His devotion to providing a healthy, beneficial product is obvious; this is a guy who made the fermented tea for his mom and then, after he saw her get healthy, started making it for the rest of us. I wanted to know first, how all of this had come down and second, when was it coming back. I spoke with G.T. Dave over the phone , barely three weeks since the recall occurred.

SH: ***So, what happened?***

GT: Well, some concerns were raised last month that there's a potential for slightly elevated levels of alcohol in all raw kombucha products that occurs in the bottles when they are in the marketplace. No exact percentage of bottles has been identified, but because it is such a sensitive issue, if even one bottle is above, it's a big deal. We chose to do a temporary withdrawal and suspension of all sales until we identified the problem and resolved it.

SH: ***When you talk about raised alcohol levels, what are we talking about, exactly? Is that like a .8 or a .5?***

GT: Yes. If it's .5 or below, it's considered a non-alcoholic product. If it's .6, the regulation is that it can be considered an alcoholic beverage.

SH: ***Really?***

GT: Yes. Therefore, the labeling and the licensing and the sales would need to be different. Now, at the end of the day, almost everybody understands that a .6 doesn't mean anyone is going to become intoxicated. The removal of the product was a precautionary step to make sure our labeling was in compliance with the contents of the product.

SH: ***Did you find a way to stabilize it?***

GT: Well, the beauty of kombucha is that it's a raw, living food and through that living characteristic, it has an active personality that occurs throughout its shelf life. Once this problem came up — and we began identifying and studying all aspects to find what would cause the product to go above .5 — but it's not an overnight fix because the product is dynamic. It's a little like trying to grow a banana that won't get brown spots...it's a living thing. Kombucha is a living, organic, natural product and trying to standardize it kind of goes against what it represents.

SH: ***Yeah, I wondered about that. There's plenty of products on the market that are devoid of live nutrients, but this is different; this actually changes because it's a living organism.***

GT: That's one of the most frustrating parts of this. There are other products in the stores that are less healthy; even products that could lead to obesity, or have plastic containers that may leach, and yet here's kombucha that, because of a technical situation, got blown out of proportion and now is being heavily scrutinized.

SH: ***I love the stuff. I drink it almost everyday, and just love the way it makes me feel. When it was no longer available, I started to wonder. I thought, is all this from a competitor because your drink was so popular?***

GT: We've heard the conspiracy theories and some of them seem almost valid. I mean, why are we in particular under attack?*

SH: ***Maybe because everybody loves your kombucha and you're too successful? How did all of this came about; when did it start and why?***

GT: Apparently, there was a supplier on the East Coast — making another brand — that was allegedly being a little careless; not keeping it refrigerated or maybe had poor handling procedures, and that raised some concerns about their product. These concerns were identified and confirmed; this occurred within a Whole Foods store. This product was then removed from their store and next, Whole Foods did an overview of all their brands and requested lab tests from all the brands. One of the brands chose not to respond with a lab test and instead, stated they were removing it from the shelves. That triggered even more concerns for WF and they went ahead and did their own testing and discovered that every brand they carried tested out above the limit at some point in their product. They chose to remove all products from the shelves without subsequent testing.

SH: ***Was this for all their fermented drinks—did they run the lab tests on all fermented drink products?***

GT: That's an interesting thing — they only targeted the kombuchas. But, from a rational perspective, they should have tested all the raw, fermented beverages, because all are pre-disposed to contain at least some trace amounts of alcohol.

SH: ***I've noticed a lot of new fermented drinks that took your place; even the new ones have warnings on their labels about trace amounts of alcohol. And yet, they are still on the shelves.***

GT: Yes, but it's become apparent that all the fermented beverages have been drastically re-formulated and this was happening at the same time as the testing and pulling occurred. I can tell there were some immediate adjustments made; I can taste it. Which, in my opinion, has compromised the product's integrity.

SH: ***So, are we going to have to open kombucha speakeasies now, in order to get your product?***

GT: We hope that's not the case, but some alternative method of retailing needs to happen for our product to be sold. We're exploring our options, but at the end of the day, our purpose and our objective is to put out a great product in line with what people want and expect. We will never make a beverage just to make money or to quench thirst and that's it. We want something that provides authentic health benefits and genuine nutritional value. We're hoping to get product back on the shelves very soon — not only what people expect from us and are used to, but that will also be in compliance.

(continued on page 54)

(**Kombucha** *continued from page 9)*

SH: ***And that sounds like a tricky process because, as you've stated, kombucha is a living thing, and not easy to standardize for the very same reasons — it's raw, living qualities — that make it healthy. For some of us this is very frustrating.***

GT: Some of our retailers are anxious to know when we will be back on the shelves; they are also frustrated, like, what's taking so long? But, to make a special, live product takes time. Now, to make this kind of controlled kombucha is even harder because, being alive and natural, it has never been controlled by man.

SH: ***Now I understand why so many people make it in their own homes. GT, I'd like to ask you about some of the rumors currently circulating. You know the one about a certain female celebrity who loves kombucha?***

GT: Of course. That's a case of a situation being totally blown out of proportion. The celeb in question has been drinking our product for years. Because of her current situation, people were scrutinizing her closely. About two weeks before our situation with WF occurred, this person had an issue of her own occur and people tried — wrongly — to put the two things together; the rumors of high levels of alcohol in our beverage; our product being removed from the shelves, and her situation. The rumor stated she had been drinking kombucha for the alcohol, but she has since gone on record to make it very clear the beverage did not cause any problems — faulty technology was to blame — and that rumors connecting the incident to GT's Synergy products were unfounded.

We are working to get it back on the shelves, but not at the risk of compromising quality or the product's integrity.

SH: ***If I was a competitor, I would be thrilled to know you were out of the game for awhile. And now, I notice new products on the shelves that seem to have come in overnight and taken your place. I don't know if that's a coincidence or not.***

GT: Well, I know there was a lot of finger-pointing and whispering. I do want to say, since this has happened, we have gotten literally thousands of emails a day. Not a single one has come from someone complaining or having a problem with the product.

SH: ***That's great. Well, let's cut to the chase. What is the situation at this time, and how soon can we expect to see it back on the shelves? And, is there anywhere you are still distributing it?***

GT:Some stores still have product left over from prior inventory, but we have not re-launched it. We want to make sure first that it's not only compliant, but is also something we can believe in and stand behind. So, we are working to get it back on the shelves, but not at the risk of compromising quality or the product's integrity.

SH: ***As one of the people anxiously awaiting the return of GT's Kombucha, what's your time-frame look like?***

GT: It will definitely happen sometime this summer; we hope in the next few weeks. There's a lot of red tape because we're in a situation where there's not a lot of people who understand what we are doing, or examples of past stuff to compare it to, we're in a very slow process. And because of the category we're in — we're expected to be the best and know it all — we now find ourselves in a somewhat compromising position.

SH: ***Are people going to have to be at least 21 in order to drink kombucha? There's going to be an awfully lot of disappointed teens if that's the case, not to mention all the athletes who drink it.***

GT: We sure hope not. We want to make this available to everyone.

SH: ***And, where is your kombucha distributed?***

GT: It's just in the United States, for now. We don't want to spread ourselves too thin and compromise the quality. Distribution has been suspended throughout the USA, as a precaution.

SH: ***That pretty much answers my questions. Is there anything else you would really like our readers to know?***

GT: We always want our fans to understand just how important their support is to us. We know that many people drink kombucha for genuine health reasons. My heart goes out to these people. It's not the finances involved, and it's not the rumors — it's that people who really seem to feel they have benefited from this product, can't get it.

SH: ***It feels like there's a change in paradigms about health taking place these days. It's like two streams of thought, with new ideas and old restrictions that, in some cases, seem no longer relevant to some of us. I sense you are trying to provide something healthy and living and organic, and at the same time, you are having to deal with some restrictions based on standardized products that are keeping something a lot of us need and want from the marketplace. I want to wish you the best, and I will be looking forward to tasting my GT Dave's Gingerade Kombucha again, very soon, hopefully.***

GT: Thank you, And, just so your readers know, my name is GT Dave and I'm the President and CEO of Millenium Products.

SH: ***Thank you for your time, GT; and thank you for your wonderful kombucha products.***

This interview was conducted and written by Sharon Hall forThe Whole Person Calendar.

To learn more about Kombucha and Millennium Products, visit the website at www.synergydrinks.com.

For fun, check out GT's Synergy Kombucha on Facebook to browse hundreds of comments of love and support, and add your own thoughts.

*For information on what's happening around the raw foods issue, visit Tommy Rosen's "What's The FBI Doing In My Milk?"posted