

Kombucha, Yerba Mate, and Chai: Three enjoyable alternatives to coffee

America is all about diversity, choice, and freedoms. We are also about food – there is always a spot to get something to drinks or eat right around the corner. The term foodies originated here and debates, discussions even arguments about who makes to best burger, pizza, steak, et al are commonplace. Tell someone that “so and so” makes the best burgers on the earth and you may very well invite some serious disagreement.

Point being, that we love our food and we love the varieties that food comes in. America also being a land of individuality – the cowboy, the entrepreneur, the CEO, the mogul, the inventor, etc. – means that we all love to take a concept and add a touch of our self to it.



Case in point: very few people will walk into a cafe and ask for a cup of coffee unless you are longer in the tooth and come from a generation where a cup of coffee was just that.

The barista would probably stare at you like you had three heads. On the other spectrum to the old-timer who likes a "Cup of Joe" is the new generation that requests and small novel type of coffee. The "I'll have an iced venti caramel mocha Macchiato, half the ice, two squirts of French Rivieran vanilla, a dash of ancient Mayan cinnamon, one Sweet & Low, one organic Stevia, one spoon of Guatemalan Torbanado sugar farmed by non-profit organizations, topped with gluten-free/flavor free/dairy free whipped cream of Unicorn's milk, shaken but not stirred, hugged twice and blessed by a Tibetan Lama served at exactly 58 degrees Fahrenheit and garnished with Marcel Proust madeleine. The name for the order is Werner Heisenberg." type of customer.

Phew! Might as well take a nap while they order this drink that is impossible to create. Geez, I just want a Cuban espresso!

When I am in a queue and I encounter this person my mind conjures up the fast food commercial of a car waiting in a drive-thru and the car in front of them is taking forever and asking for napkins, less ice, a straw, some ketchup, and on and on. The person waiting just steps on the gas and pushes that car out of the way and with a big ear-to-ear smile they grab their fries. Is it wrong to do something similar in person while in a queue at a cafe? Just muckle the person out of the way and grab you "Cup of Joe"?

I mean, in my imagination of course. In the "real" world I would never do that because to quote Loo: "It would be wrong." It's best to build a heart of extraordinary magnitude.

I digress. People love to start their day with a cup of something and coffee and tea aren't the only choices. America is the land of diversity and choices, right?

Three of the popular alternatives are Kombucha, Yerba Mate and of course, Chai. Never had one? Interested in what the hoopla

is all about? Read on.

Kombucha Tea

Commonly called Kombucha (which is not the tea, but the microbial culture itself), **Kombucha Tea** is a sweetened green or black tea fermented by a microbial culture of bacteria and yeast that produces a sour, slightly acidic and alcoholic drink with a slight carbonated tingle on the tongue. It's sort of like a hard apple cider in many ways, but normal Kombucha Tea has about 0.5% alcohol content, so it's safe for youngsters and you can get behind the wheel.

One of the colloquial terms used today is "mushroom tea" – which is gross – even though it is not a mushroom. This term refers only to the mushroom-like film that forms on the surface, called SCOBY which is a "Symbiotic Culture Of Bacteria and Yeast."

If you know your stuff, then you know yeast is a living organism and they aren't like your deadbeat cousin who crashes on your couch because he needs a place to stay for a few weeks but ends up staying for months – these little gals and guys love to work. The work comes in the form of fermentation which creates the alcohol and vinegar-like acetic acid and that carbonated mouthfeel. Good thing these guys and gals are workaholics because that means there are lots of probiotics and therefore health benefits. Since it's a green or black tea which has anti-oxidant health benefits and polyphenols, when you add the probiotics you get a combination that also kills many potentially harmful microorganisms in the gut, a double whammy.



Be forewarned, some of the diehard, zealous Kombucha drinkers will claim all the same health benefits that the equally fanatic marijuana proponents claim: it will cure you of anything and everything from minor ailments like headaches, insomnia, and acne to arthritis, cancer, AIDs, joblessness, Poltergeists and even badgering, henpecking mother-in-laws.

There are two cultures – pardon the pun – that claim to have invented the stuff: China and Russia. No one is 100% sure and even the word itself is of unknown origins so there's no clue there. Even more doubtful is how long it's been around – anywhere from 200 to 2000 years. Who cares? all that matters to we foodies is whether it is delicious or not. It is!

The drink is getting increasingly more popular with each passing year and you can not only find it in bottle form at most cafes, but some cafes like the Java Shack even offer Kombucha on tap. People love the drink so much that they even make their own batches at home and enjoy trying out different recipes.

While I don't consider myself an aficionado of Kombucha, I think it is delicious and will occasionally order it. It's

pretty darn good!

Mate

Yerba Mate is a caffeinated drink made from the *Ilex paraguariensis* plant that is native to South America to which its name alludes. Traditionally the drink is made by steeping leaves just like you would a tea or using a tea bag, but these days it is also common to use a powder from the leaves after they are dried, chopped, and ground. The leaves or powder are the *yerba* component and the *mate* component refers to the Calabash gourd that it was served in.

Colonists, or should I say *conquistadores*, learned about the drink when they arrived in the New World and spotted the indigenous *Tupi* and *Guarani* tribes quaffing the drink, which they used for medicinal, health and even spiritual benefits.

Eventually the *Guachos* or cowboys who worked the many ranches that sprouted up began to adopt the drink as a regular way to start their long day since it was an efficient stimulant containing Xanthines: theophylline, theobromine and caffeine just like tea, coffee and even chocolate. Eventually, this would spread to the general populace and the mate took off and spread all over South America. Today, outside of South America, it enjoys a relatively modest popularity worldwide – with the exceptions being Lebanon and the world's largest importer, Syria.



The flavor is very earthy, grassy, and sort of like...ground-y. I know that's not a word but it is what I taste whenever I have sampled it. Using "dirty" or "dirt-like" doesn't seem fair. It doesn't taste that bad, but it's no my, er...cup of tea. I would need to add a few other things like sweetener, dairy, etc. to make it palatable. I do have some friends that swear by it as a stimulant and swear that it tastes delicious, but I'd rather just swear at it.

Health benefits? Like its flavor, it has its feet on the ground, and the health benefits are not as zany or loony as that which comes with Kombucha (and marijuana). It does have the aforementioned polyphenol antioxidants and tea-like antioxidants, as well as Vitamins like A, Bs, C, E and the minerals magnesium, calcium, iron, potassium, zinc, manganese and others. For you Joe Rogan fans, the plant is an MAOI (Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitor), *in vitro*. That's all I'll say about that.

Since the way Yerba Mate works and with its slightly different ratios of components, it is a different quality of stimulant when compared to coffee and tea and is very popular with athletes and "biohackers" looking for the alertness and focus without the crash or caffeine addiction. There is even a Yerba

Mate Kombucha which I have never encountered in the wild and is sort of a Bigfoot. "Some day we'll catch him!"

Interested in trying it? The first place that comes to mind that serves it is Mirasol's Cafe. If you drink "Yerba: in a way that you think I or others may find tasty, let us/me know so I can give it another shot.

Chai

Lastly, is one that is well-known to the vast majority of the planet, Chai. Also touted as having many health benefits as Kombucha Tea and Yerba Mate the drink is known by its full name, Masala Chai, is chock full of them. The real thing that is. The delicious concoction made of rich, strong black tea, heavy milk, and a variety of spices is an ancient one with roots in India where it was available in the cafes and many tea houses before spreading to the rest of the world.

If you speak Portuguese, Spanish, or Mandarin you know the word *cha* and can see where the word Chai came from. The Portuguese and Spanish adopted the Mandarin word from trade and interaction with the Chinese. The "Masala" component comes from the Urdu word *maṣālah* (one of the widest spoken languages on the Indian subcontinent) for "blend of spices," and the Urdu word itself was adopted from the Arabic *maṣāliḥ*.

Originally or traditionally, Chai was made by brewing the black tea leaves, in the water, milk, spice and herb blend, and sweetener (brown or coconut sugar, honey, or jaggery) altogether and then it was either strained and served as is or "pulled." Pulling is the aspect of holding the two pitchers, one very low and the one with the Chai high overhead then pouring the Chai into the lower one – then switching places and repeating. This thoroughly mixed and oxygenated the tea and some swear that it enhances the flavor.



At this point, we've mentioned all those antioxidants that come with tea and even more of them come in true Chai which contains Fennel, Ginger, and Black Pepper. Additional benefits come from the ginger which aids digestion, gives the immune system a boost, reduces inflammation and improves circulation, Fennel which provides Vitamin C, potassium and fiber, Clove which clove helps digestion, has analgesic and bacteria fighting properties, Cinnamon which aids in digestion, balances blood sugar, and has anti-inflammatory properties and finally Cardamom which helps boost the immune system and aid in ingestion too.

Sounds wonderful right? Problem is that this is real, genuine Chai and not the, er...um...American kind. Like we took cheese and watered it down so it's some odd Frankenstein monster, we took Chai and turned it into a powder and/or concentrate. Ew. Wherever possible stay away from that and stick to the real deal.

While not my preferred drink, I have had quite a few amazing cups of Chai in my time and do enjoy it. I've never had it pulled, but I have had it made the original way...and the first time I had it powdered I was revulsed and decided to never do that again. It was like some creepy version of hot chocolate

with spice added.

Of course, here in America we also tamper with imported dishes and drinks and often it leads to a fusion of something wonderful, but in the case of a Chai Latte which uses steamed milk, not so much and in the case of adding espresso, blasphemous. If you are the type that drinks or serves this Faustian libation which clearly uses water from the Cocytus, then we shouldn't be friends – I don't need that kind of negativity or black magic in my life.

Where can you get a good Chai? I honestly don't know, but I bet **you** know.