

ENTREPRENEURS

By SEANAN FORBES

Strange brew

Brooklyn's 'Kombucha Man' builds bubbling biz

LEAN and pale, with his reddish blond hair tied back in a ponytail, Eric Childs looks less like a driven business owner than an extra in a touring production of "Hair." But to hear him tell it, he's a born entrepreneur.

"I'd been trying to start companies since I was 12 years old," he says, citing a roster of attempts that include a portable barbecue rig, online businesses and a nonprofit, Frisbees for Peace, designed to get Israelis and Palestinians to play Frisbee together.

"This is number six."

"This" is Kombucha Brooklyn, a beverage business that's taken off since Childs, now 25, started it in a Williamsburg apartment two years ago.

For the uninitiated, Kombucha is fermented tea whose roots date back 2,000 years. Its flavor appeals to some and appalls others. Seeing it in production, its conglomeration of live bacteria and yeast clinging to a disc of cellulose and floating in tarnished liquid, could scare almost anybody away from the finished product.

To Childs, though, it is the stuff of life.

His initiation came five years ago, while he was working in an art gallery. He wasn't blossoming with health. He traveled with bottles of Pepto-Bismol to combat chronic heartburn, and invested large portions of his salary attempting to rid himself of acne.

One day, his employer brought in a bottle of kombucha. Childs tried it. It didn't go down well. Every day, his boss gave him a few sips in a paper cup. One day, Childs asked whether he could have his own bottle. A few weeks later, he noticed his skin was clear — and the heartburn was no more.

Childs was sold — but he wasn't yet selling. That inspiration came a few years later, when he noted that "the booch" was growing in popularity, and realized nobody in New York was making it. He was "in transition mode" at the time, working in a res-

taurant, and figured it might as well be him.

Soon he'd built "this little fermentation room under the staircase" in the apartment he shared with three roommates, drawing quizzical looks from his Hasidic landlord. To learn the ropes, he used the Internet and the telephone, asking advice and collecting information. Trial and error led him to a taste he liked. Soon he was carrying bottles of his brew everywhere he went and handing it out to friends, earning the title of Kombucha Man.

Childs' initial plan was to deliver his wares to local shops by bike. But things changed quickly when he was written up in a Brooklyn blog, and interested sellers jumped.

"Within minutes of it being published, I got calls," he says. "I'm talking to the Northeast buyer from Whole Foods, and he's like, 'I'll take 1,000 cases,' and I'm like, 'Well, I have 30.'"

If he could find a way to meet the demand, Childs realized, he'd have a major business on his hands. He found a production facility in New Jersey, and last June, bottles started arriving at a handful of Brooklyn locations, such as Marlow and Sons in Williamsburg and Bierkraft in Park Slope.

Demand soon outstripped supply, and he began scouting locations for a full-scale brewery in Brooklyn. He had investors ready to go, but when the deal fell apart at the last minute, he decided to move his production to western Massachusetts, after locating a kombucha maker there with a lab and distillation space he could use.

Today a portion of his many working hours are spent traveling north to visit the production line, where Kombucha Brooklyn is made in three flavors: Straight Up, Urban Passion (with passion fruit) and Red Ginger (with ginger and strawberries). Others are spent in front of the computer, on the phone, selling his wares at public markets like Brooklyn Flea and managing accounts from the apartment he shares with his fiancée in Windsor Terrace, where the couple home-ferment everything from tempeh to mead.

Indeed, Childs, who's taught kombucha-making classes at Brooklyn Kitchen and sells home brewing kits through Kombucha Brooklyn's Web site, is something of an evangelizer on the subject of fermentation; his voice vibrates as he talks about its alchemical bubbling.

"Fermentation is a rebirth of whatever you're fermenting," he says. "It's such an awesome experience to see."

Childs got a boost in January, when Kombucha Brooklyn won a contest for the Next Big Small Brand held by the Rooster Design Group, beating out more than 140 other entrants. The prize: design services and consultation, which led to a sharp new look for the brand.

Less fortuitous has been the recent focus on kombucha by the federal government, which is considering whether it should be regulated like beer or wine, due to an alcohol content that can reach as high as 3 percent. Some distributors, like Whole Foods, have pulled all unpasteurized kombucha off the shelves pending

a decision.

That small setback has done little to dent Childs' fervor, though. Having anticipated the alcohol flap, he's made sure his product's content is below the legal cap of 0.5 percent, putting him in a favorable position. And he's focused on further expansion — eventually he wants to see his bottles in every borough.

That's the border, though: This is a New York City product. He's insistent on that point, even if it's currently made elsewhere.

"The heart of Brooklyn is in every single bottle," he says passionately. "I think I did the most Brooklyn thing — to figure out how to make a product and make it happen."



TEA TIME: Eric Childs started Kombucha Brooklyn after learning to make the fermented tea in his apartment.

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Source: Kimberly Clark

