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BRANCHING OUT

AT ROOT WILD, LOCAL KOMBUCHA IS EXPANDING ITS APPEAL WITH FORAGED FLAVORS AND A MELLOW VIBE.

BY ALEXANDRA HALL // PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN LITTLE



To booch or not to booch, that is the question. On one hand, devotees argue that kombucha lowers blood pressure and can even help ward off cancer. On the other, most doctors dispute this but cite some evidence that the fizzy fermented libation has benefits similar to probiotic supplements: boosted immunity and improved digestive health, which is increasingly seen as connected with mental health.

But the debate seems worlds away once you've installed yourself at one of the sun-drenched, bright tangerine benches at Root Wild Kombucha, its flora-dotted patio tucked into the corner of a buzzy block on Munjoy Hill. Soothing world music streams through the wide garage door, tatted-up couples loaf on the leather sofa just inside—everything seems to be in slow motion. Vibrant photos of surfers and beach scenes line the walls, and in San Franciscan style, you can see all the way down Fox Street as it dips dramatically before splaying out to the East Bayside neighborhood below. In this moment, you'd be forgiven for thinking you're in California.

California, as it turns out, wasn't far from Root Wild founder and "boochmaster" Reid Emmerich's mind when he began brewing the idea for the business or when he opened it in October of 2018, in partnership with Lone Pine Brewing Company cofounders and owners John Paul and Tom Madden.

"I knew plenty of people in Portland drank kombucha, and that they'd prefer to drink local kombucha," explains the native New Englander. "But there wasn't any being made here. They were all drinking kombucha from California. So it seemed like a no-brainer to start providing it locally."

For Emmerich it began with a home-brewing kit, which he used to make kombucha in his home kitchen. He would bring the results to the homes of extremely appreciative friends. That experience soon drove him to create and head up the kombucha program at Urban Farm Fermentory. He did so for a decade before deciding that his science-driven fixation with foraging local and organic ingredients deserved its very own enclave. Root Wild was born.

Opposite: Tucked into a corner of Washington Avenue, Root Wild Kombuchery and its patio offer a welcoming hangout space. **This page:** Locals and visitors alike congregate in the tasting room to sample flavors like pineapple-jalapeño.



Licensed as a brewery (traditional kombucha's alcohol content comes in at just under 1%, and the legal limit for "nonalcoholic beverages" is 0.5%, so it's classified as a beer), Root Wild is housed in the erstwhile and revamped Sahara Club, with production in back and a tasting room in front. They also make "hard" kombucha (which requires a second fermentation and comes in at 4.5% alcohol) as well as beer, but their focus remains squarely on traditional kombucha. "You don't drink traditional kombucha to get drunk," Emmerich says. "It's about the flavor profiles."

The collision of science and flavor exploration is Emmerich's *raison d'être*. "I'm not a doctor or an herbalist," he says. "I've got a degree in environmental science; my passion's for nature, and fermenting and blending tastes is what's at work here." To that end, he starts with an all-natural base of fair-trade tea and ferments it for about three weeks, then adds a culture of yeast and sugars that transforms it into a drink boosted with C and B vitamins.

Which flavors are brewing depends on what's growing and getting foraged. One week that might be juniper mixed with knotweed—"It's a weed that reproduces and spreads like crazy when it gets big, but when it's young, its shoots are almost like asparagus, and you can juice it," says Emmerich—or organic and local flavors like wild local blueberries and lemon thyme. Year-round there's the slightly tart, earthy elixir Root Wild creates from lavender, lemon balm, verbena,

and white pine needles (which Emmerich forages himself). Many of the kombuchas are available to tote home in cans and are distributed around Maine and New Hampshire; however, in the tasting room Emmerich is able to offer smaller, inventive batches that he pours into flights and to-go growlers—flavors like orange-juniper and pineapple-jalapeño.

The place is filled with plants that reference what's on order—sipping a grapefruit and hibiscus kombucha, one can watch the sun's rays filter through the billowing blooms of a potted Chinese hibiscus on the patio. "We tried to bring nature into the picture with the space," Emmerich says. And wherever the Cali vibe rears its head, it's always Cali by way of New England. Those aforementioned photos of beaches and surfing are by Emmerich's friend, local photographer Aaron McNulty, and were shot at Rye and Hampton Beaches in New Hampshire. And the gigantic tree root floating above a table like a sculptural chandelier? Emmerich dragged it out of a marsh in Freeport. All the wood behind the bar was stained using oxidized kombucha made at Root Wild—about as hyperlocal as it gets.

"We want the experience to feel and taste fresh," explains Emmerich. "Our inspiration is nature." Whatever researchers ultimately decide about the benefits of booching, it's pretty tough to believe that doing so in an environment this relaxed won't, at the very least, lower your blood pressure. +

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Owner and "boochmaster" Reid Emmerich. Flavors such as pine and lavender are all sourced locally. Leather sofas share space with brewing equipment and natural elements like giant tree roots in Root Wild's interior. **This page, from left:** The bar was stained using Root Wild's own kombucha. With its very low alcohol level, traditional kombucha is less about buzz and more about inventive flavor profiles.