

Kombucha diary

*for the public event 'Non-Human Diaries',
curated with Petronella Grönroos
at Kohta, Helsinki, September 7th, 2019*

My kombucha brewing process started online, on market place, where someone called Ingmar sold me a scoby. The scoby consists of a symbiotic relationship between yeast cultures and acidic bacteria that form a white-ish, gelatinous, glossy mushroom braid membrane. This mushroom, that isn't a fungus, feels most comfortable in an acid pH value and it feeds off sugars. It is commonly put in a mixture of tea, vinegar, sugar, and honey. The brewing process takes about ten to fourteen days which means digesting the sugars in the concoction. As part of this process, they develop glucuronic acid, lactic acid, acetic acid, and various vitamins that are then consumed as a fizzy refreshment.

For the last twenty-seven days, I shared my living room with scobies, one bobbing in a big hexagon shaped glass jar reading 'salted peanuts' and another one in a plain 2L cylinder jar. Flatmates, my partner, my parents, friends, friends of flatmates moved in and out. I and the scobies were the stable factors in this domestic space. Every other day I took the jar from atop of the big antique closet, to check its shape, color, smell, texture, looks, and progress.

Sometimes when I was working and not thinking about any scoby or kombucha brewing, I was surprised by catching a sour whiff from under the cotton napkin covering the jar.

Starting the first batch (out of two) meant dealing with some old trauma. My latest brewing experiment was abandoned 1,5 years ago when I moved to Lithuania. A dark red film of what once used to be a scoby floating in tea, sugar, and apple cider vinegar, was left dry and hard, sticking to the bottom of the glass.

My biggest challenge was and is: keeping the scobie alive, more specifically: letting the tea cool before serving it to the scoby. I am training my patience and have to work on accepting that 50 degrees is not close enough to 30 degrees.

So, finding the scoby still alive a day after setting up the jar was a joyful moment. My note on Tuesday, August 15th: 'It's still alive!'

My understanding and relation to the fermentation process developed a visual focus with some olfactory side notes. I did not dare to taste or touch. During the first week, the smell became less and less sweet, making me feel relieved that the scoby was using the sugars that I was reluctant to digest. Despite the hexagon shape of the jar, the scoby kept much of its perfectly round shape, reminding me of the surface of the moon. Starting off sleek and almost white. With time it started showing craters, bubbles, retention of moisture, frills, and colorings.

When I started seeing dark strings and flakes, it reminded me of a placenta and the inside of a womb during pregnancy, or maybe just the Massive Attack music video from my prevalent '90ties memory.

Out of its context and function, it became a being, presented in a jar with formaldehyde, gazed at by curious children, balancing on their toes in the

natural history museum. The kids moving between disgust, marvel, interest, and entertainment by the possibility to scare their friends with unknown and familiar creatures from earlier days.

Observing the jar on the kitchen counter, swelling on the waves I created by relocating the jar for further inspection, the scoby caught a sunbeam. Moving gently and gracefully in the amber-colored liquid, they suddenly became jellyfish. Magical beings that connect millions of years of life on earth sucked me into a realization of deep-time of the history of the yeast-bacterial mushroom that I was collaborating with.

Forming a new skin on the surface of the brew, I was reminded of my grandmother who was disgusted by skin appearing when heating milk.

I wanted to touch and feel and be more involved with what was happening. I felt excluded from the process but afraid to possibly damage my companion or infect the liquid with bacteria from my hands.

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'Kombu' is a kind of seaweed that is commonly used in East Asian cuisine. It gives a savory/umami taste and has a sturdy texture making it convenient to use for making soup stock. 'Cha' in Japanese, like in many languages, means tea. Tea made from kombu is a thing but never got as popular in North America and Europe as the fermented tea from the symbiotic yeast-bacteria membrane. Calling this refreshment kombucha is probably based on a misunderstanding.

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Big blisters were now forming on the surface, some filled with bubbles, others with liquid. This scoby was like a too fanatic sixty-year-old, getting all excited over blisters at the first aid after a crazy long weekend of Nordic walking. Blisters as a triumph of perseverance.

It made me wonder what the liquid in blisters tastes like. I forgot. I must have tasted it once, from a finger or so. Tasting from a foot blister would be too embarrassing to share in a text. I googled the question. But no one seemed to care. The first result was: '20x the taste of sperm', never mind.

At the last encounter, the scoby looked like a landscape, a sea, a lake with shores that were constantly changing. I wondered which part could be the beach? could there be a river or a dune appearing? Flows were moving in a time that I couldn't relate to. It moved like plants, almost like rocks, so slowly.

At day twenty-seven, the end of the second batch, I got more and more used to the sour whiffs, the changes in the jar seemed more stable. The associations were drained. I strained the kombucha into a large measuring cup and then into bottles. It looked so active, so fizzy, the bubbles are many, small, and really active. I tasted, and finally, let the kombucha flow into my body and welcomed all that the scoby had produced by digesting the sugar and honey.