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Frank Cook
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Roots Beer

Long before traveling to Jamaica in September 2004 I had cultivated an appreciation for brewing. Back in 1990 one of my comrades at the People's Intergalactic Food Conspiracy #1 Co-op in Durham, NC shared with me one of his homebrews, a black cherry stout. One sip expanded my mind and pallet to new levels of appreciating beer. Like Veruka Salt, the gum chewing girl in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory", my taste buds moved through a series of diverse tasty flavors. Something I had never encountered in a beer before. From that point on I became an enthusiastic homebrewer.

A whole group of us began brewing together outdoors. First with beer recipes then experimenting on our own. One elder in our circle always seemed to be encouraging us further with his memorable creations of all-grain beers and later herbal beers containing herbs such as Siberian Ginseng and Damiana. Before one of our brewing gatherings we went to a pick-your-own blueberry patches then later made a big batch of blueberry mead. That became a yearly tradition for a while.

This introduction to brewing emphasized cleanliness more than sterility. I used airlocks and beer yeast in attempts to ensure a desired outcome. I had read about open ferments and enjoyed them while traveling about the world including chichi from corn and various beers from grains and fruits such as pineapples, marula, palms, cassava, and rice. But it was going to Jamaica that really shifted my perceptions of brewing.

Roots beer. Even the name elicits a positive response in me. Just saying it grounds and centers me. Say the name out loud and see what comes up for you. Beers made from roots have been a big part of human history. I feel humanity would not be here if it we had not mastered fermentation. (Read Stephen Buhner's work for an thorough discussion on this.) Our old mind knows this and is comforted by the power, health and groundedness of that phrase.

Jamaica is famous for its roots beers made by Rastafarian Bushmen. During my journey there I had several opportunities to slow down with bushmen and learn a bit about the process they use in making their brews and the plants they put in them. I went on daily herb walks and was impressed by how familiar they were with plants and their creative (and often confusing) names for plants such as calling avocados "pears".

When making the brews they used a range of different plants and the number of ingredients in it was significant to them energetically. I did not learn the deeper meanings behind this but I understood that certain numbers were important to them.

One bushman, Elroy, I feel indebted to for slowing down and letting me take in how he brewed. He went out and harvested a bunch of plants including Jamaica's second most famous plant—Jamaican Sarsaparilla root. I recognized about half the plants he used. They included (scientific names when known in parentheses):

Elroy's Jamaican Roots Beer

Jamaican Sarsaparilla (Smilax) root
Strongback (Cuphea) root
Shuteye Marker (Mimosa) plant
“Dandelion” (Senna) plant
Coconut (Cocos) root
Guava (Psidium) root
Vervain (verbena) plant
Chainy root
Bloodwrist plant
Hug-me-close root
Tan pan root
Jack saga root
Long liver
Cold tongue
Dark tongue
Dog's tongue
Search-me-heart
Soon-on-the-earth
God's bush
Devil has whip
Water grass
Raw moon

He fills a pot with all this and adds water and on top he splits open 5 green bananas and lays them across the top “for iron”. He cooked all this on an open fire for two hours. Then honey was added and this was poured into bottles. In about three days one could start drinking them and they would be good for a week or so (if they lasted that long!) before they turned to vinegar.

I tried a number of different ones when I was there and enjoyed their vitality and flavors.

As I have said, I had certainly heard of and tasted open fermented drinks. I understood that most of the world still drank ferments of this type, and that inventions such as the airlock and isolated yeast cultures were not only modern, but largely restricted to the modern world.

But it was not until that journey to Jamaica that I felt myself embrace that way of making short-term wines; Wines that would become vinegar if not consumed soon enough (which is not so bad). And since that time I have experimented with Sandor trying different honey to fruit ratios and listened with more enthusiasm to his stories about wild wines. I admire my fellow fermenters who went wild sooner than I. I will never forget their ginger sodas and sassafras wines.

On a recent trip to southern Africa we made open-fermented wines from dates we had harvested along with honey. They were enjoyed throughout the trip. I was always satisfied with the results. What it lacks in maturity is balanced by a light, bubbly, sweet, very alive drink that brings a nice tingle to the body. Relearning the knowledge of these natural wines is essential to our humanity.

FCC
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Frank Chi

Back in the late 1980's when I worked at a food co-op, I became aware of probiotic organisms that (hopefully) live in our guts. We sold a pill form of Acidophilus (one group of pro-biotics) that was quite pricey. I complained about this to one of my mentors and he told me that I could make my own pro-biotics by chopping up red cabbage and letting it sit covered with a cloth on my kitchen counter for five days. After that, I was to drain the liquid and compost the cabbage. If I stored the liquid in the fridge it would last for a week and one tablespoon a day was all the probiotics my body needed.

It was not until after 2001 or so that I actually began to make kim chi following a few different recipes I found. They all seemed relatively complicated. One told me to store it in a container underground. With each recipe I tried there were steps of soaking veggies separately, pounding the veggies and/or pouring off the water. None of this made sense to me. Upon reflection I realized I was basically after those some pro-biotics I had made years before. By using a brine instead of just water I kept the veggies palatable. After some experimentation I came up with a simple recipe for making kim chi.

Basically you bring together a collection of vegetables. I always include a member of the Brassica genus such as bok choy or nappa cabbage. There are many varieties to choose from. This genus grows a nice colony of friendly organisms.

With this I add carrots, golden beets (red beets work but make the whole jar various shades of red), ginger, onions, garlic, turnips, radishes, burdock, seaweeds, fresh turmeric, peppers, et cetera. I sometimes add spices. One of my favorites is Cumin.

In preparing the vegetables I really try to think about texture and shape, cutting the veggies in different ways that will delight people's mouths. I fill a jar pushing down the veggies, layering them. Then I fill the jar with brine (salt and water) which has the salinity of salt water by taste.

Once a day I take a spoon and push any floating veggies under the surface of the brine. Usually within a week or so depending on the time of the year, the flavor and texture gets to a place I like and I put it in the fridge where it maintains that condition for a long while.

Enjoy this simply method that has worked well for me lots of times over the years.

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