Tea Time

Kambucha mushrooms have Californians brewing

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“With all this extra energy, I painted the sky on the ceiling of my living room. It’s so dreamy and gay,” says Beljin Zohr, 44, an HIV positive Los Angeles artist. Just a few months ago, Zohr was covered in scabs from an outbreak of eosinophillic folliculitis, an itchy, bumpy rash. Nothing the dermatologist gave him could clear the breakout; so, desperate, he turned to the West Coast’s latest treatment rage -- the Kambucha mushroom. Four days after he started drinking a tea made from the mushrooms and making an astringent from it, he says, “every one of the scabs was gone.”

Kambucha mushrooms, the size of salad plates, as thin as crepes and the color of fettucine, are grown and supplied by Laurel Farms’ Betsy Pryor. The former CBS publicist gives them away for a $4 shipping fee, along with long, involved instructions on making the tea, to people with AIDS, cancer and multiple sclerosis. Others are asked to pay $50.

Each mushroom -- which arrives in a plastic bag already soaking in its own tea -- continuously reproduces itself. People who drink the tea (12 ounces a day is suggested) need two mushrooms going at once to keep a steady supply, since it takes 7 to 10 days to brew.

Although no one knows why, Kambucha tea drinkers generally feel more energy, report better digestion and have “a great overall feeling,” says Los Angeles native David Kersey. “I think it works if you think it will, if you tell yourself it will,” he says.

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