

BEYOND THE BUZZ

Ojai's Flying Embers finds a healthy beer alternative with hard kombucha.

BY EMILY DODI



“M

y wife and kids were evacuated,” Bill Moses says. “I remember the smoke was coming in. The fire captain came in and got our names and the numbers of our next of kin in case there was an over burn.” Moses, founder of Flying Embers Hard Kombucha, recalls the perilous days and nights during the Thomas Fire when he stayed behind to help protect his home and fermentation lab in the hills of Ventura.

“When the Thomas Fire came we were at Casa Barranca, where our mother culture was,” Moses says. (A mother culture is a “symbiotic culture” of bacteria and yeast used in the process of fermentation.) It can take a long time to develop a mother culture. “A year’s worth of work was at the winery.”

In 2016, Moses and a team of “passionate entrepreneurs” founded Fermented Sciences in Ojai with the goal of creating “great-tasting botanical brews with functional benefits.” It was the latest venture in Moses’s career of disrupting the beverage industry, which also includes Casa Barranca organic wines and Kevita kombucha. During that fateful winter of 2017, he and his team were on the cusp of creating an exciting “better for you” alcoholic beverage: a hard kombucha.

As the Thomas Fire barreled towards them, they were faced with the very real possibility that their new business could end before it ever really began. If the fire destroyed the mother culture, it would be back to square one. “The mother is everything,” Moses explains. “A mother culture feeds all other ferments,” Moses explains. He was in danger of losing it all.

But he was not alone.

“A lot of friends and community members made a stand there at the top of Foothill Road,” he recalls. The story of their survival is told on the company’s website: “For three relentless days our community banded together to fight the inferno. On the third night, we stood on the precipice of disaster as a wall of fire tore through the canyon towards us.”

“It was a really amazing moment,” Moses adds. “Fire was sweeping through Nordhoff Ridge.” He describes watching as 36 prison inmates and other firefighters lined up two by two, just like “soldiers of fire,” and walked from the property all the way up the hill to fight back the fire.



As everyone who was in Ventura County during the Thomas Fire knows all too well, fate came down to which way the wind blew.

It is written on the company website that, “As the flames roared above and swirling embers filled the sky, we faced the complete destruction of our dream and potentially our lives.”

Luckily for Moses and everyone else at Casa Barranca that night, the wind changed direction. His home, the lab and the mother culture were saved.

Moses describes the experience as “magnificently inspiring and challenging.” It left him and his team with a “deep appreciation for the power of nature and a profound sense of gratitude for each other and life itself.” It also inspired the name Flying Embers. “The name came out of the powerful transformation of those embers,” Moses says.

Looking back, he says, “What the fire gave us was that we went from a cool and nifty idea to something with more purpose. We saw the connective tissue of our community. We are part of a bigger experience and we want to be more of service. There is more here than a product.”

In addition to their vow to create “better for you” alcohol beverages, Flying Embers is a supporter of 1% For First Responders, the Los Angeles County Fire Museum and Next Rung, which provides resources to help combat mental health issues faced by first responders including firefighters, EMS, police and dispatchers.

Surviving the Thomas Fire gave Moses and his team the conviction and determination to “go on no matter what.” That fortitude, he explains, enabled the company to get through the tough times as a start up.

Flying Embers went on to launch their first product, Ancient Berry Hard Kombucha, in 2018. Today, the range of hard kombucha

flavors include ginger, black cherry, pineapple chili, grapefruit thyme, lemon and others.

But what inspired Moses to make hard kombucha in the first place?

Hard seltzers were already establishing a place for themselves as alternatives to beer, wine and other alcoholic beverages. Hard seltzers have “an absence of bad,” Moses says, but there’s not much good in them, either. So Moses asked himself, “What is the next generation of that?”

“I saw the health benefits of regular kombucha and saw that millennials wanted a ‘better for you’ alcohol beverage.” Still, he had some doubts. “When we got into the business we weren’t really sure how hard kombucha would be received, but the way the community and customers respond to it is beyond our expectations. Flying Embers is growing faster than Kevita did.” (The Kevita brand was so successful, it was recently sold to Pepsi-Cola.)

Flying Embers hard kombucha, Moses says, stands out for what it does have, including botanical elements and probiotic culture. Probiotics have been noted for a variety of health benefits, including helping to balance the healthy bacteria in the digestive system. Other ingredients used include wild crafted sages and locally grown plant life, giving it “unique attributes.” It is USDA Certified Organic, free of sugar and gluten and, depending on the flavor, has either low or no carbs.

It all sounds very modern. Daphne Ewing-Chow wrote in *Forbes* magazine (11/30/19) that Flying Embers “delivers the holy trinity of healthy, delicious and sexy ... fearlessly converting health and environmentally conscious beer drinkers.” But Moses is quick to point out that fermentation is an ancient science that goes beyond the grape, malt and hops. “We are bringing back an old tradition.”

An “old tradition” that is appealing to millennial and other consumers looking for “libations that are crafted toward a good buzz,” says Moses. It’s a “buzz plus,” he notes — an alcoholic beverage with bonafide health benefits.

Looking ahead, Moses has ideas for other libations, including wine products and beers that will have all sorts of functional “better for you” ingredients, like a chocolate reishi mushroom stout.

Today, Flying Embers is sold throughout Ventura County at retailers like Whole Foods and is served at restaurants such as Fluid State in Ventura, Ojai Pizza and the Yard House in Oxnard. It is also sold in 41 states, from Maine to Hawaii. Moses is planning to expand into Canada and perhaps even Europe.

As Moses watches the business grow faster than even he ever expected, it’s pretty clear that he and his team never lose sight of the fateful moments during the Thomas Fire, when it could have all gone up in smoke. Today, Flying Embers is deeply rooted in gratitude. They are not stuck looking backwards, though. Their excitement for the future is palpable. There are possibilities to explore and new libations to create that blend ancient ways with modern tastes and sensibilities.

Where does Flying Embers go from here? Wherever the wind takes them. ■

Flying Embers
www.flyingembers.com