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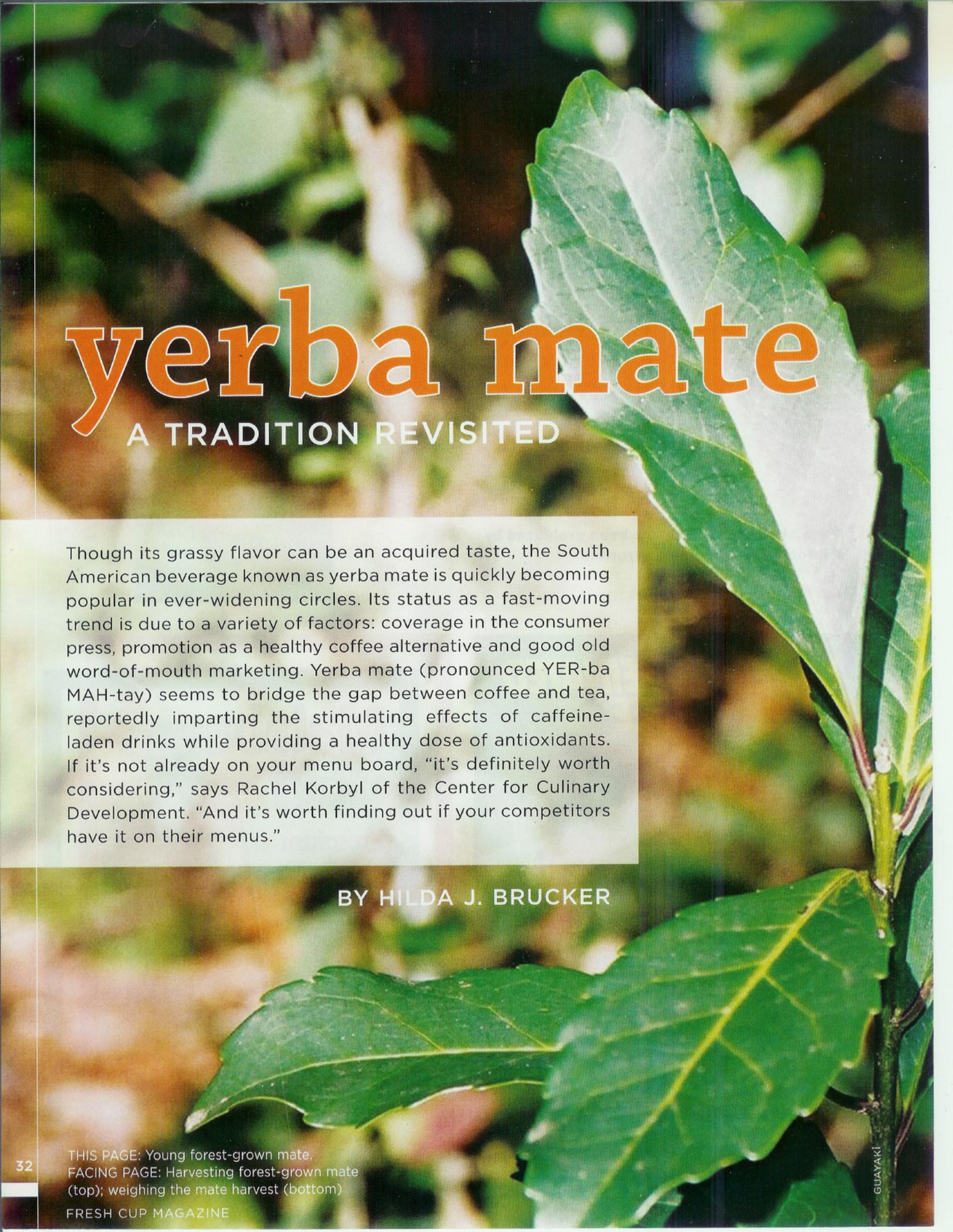
Pros and cons of a wireless café

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yerba mate

A TRADITION REVISITED

Though its grassy flavor can be an acquired taste, the South American beverage known as yerba mate is quickly becoming popular in ever-widening circles. Its status as a fast-moving trend is due to a variety of factors: coverage in the consumer press, promotion as a healthy coffee alternative and good old word-of-mouth marketing. Yerba mate (pronounced YER-ba MAH-tay) seems to bridge the gap between coffee and tea, reportedly imparting the stimulating effects of caffeine-laden drinks while providing a healthy dose of antioxidants. If it's not already on your menu board, "it's definitely worth considering," says Rachel Korbyl of the Center for Culinary Development. "And it's worth finding out if your competitors have it on their menus."

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

THIS PAGE: Young forest-grown mate.
FACING PAGE: Harvesting forest-grown mate
(top); weighing the mate harvest (bottom)

FRESH CUP MAGAZINE

The CCD studies culinary trends, tracking them through five phases of development, from just-starting-out status to mainstream acceptance. Its most recent trend-mapping report identifies yerba mate as the next big thing in beverages, though it currently makes up only five percent of the total tea market. “It has a lot going for it in terms of health benefits,” says Korbyl, who compares the mate movement to the popularity gained by chai several years ago. “What they have in common is people are really into ethnic cuisines. Hispanic beverages especially are getting popular.”

On its own, an infusion of yerba mate is slightly bitter, tasting a little like green tea and a little like chamomile (some would say it tastes like stewed hay). Because it doesn’t appeal to everyone’s palate, importers are blending the herb with a variety of flavorings and spices to create more marketable drinks.

And it seems to be working: Though mate first gained popularity in the western United States, “We’re adding distributors in the East and Midwest on a weekly basis,” says T.J. McIntyre, founder and president of Pixie Mate. Currently, mate aficionados belong to two main demographic groups: the young and the health-conscious. But as more recent research corroborates anecdotal evidence of yerba mate’s health benefits, this last category is likely to include more and more mainstream consumers. “We’re all being a bit more cognizant of what we put in our bodies,” stresses importer Dan Garcia, who sells mate under the brand name Aviva.

CENTURIES OF TRADITION

The Guarani Indians of South America first brewed yerba mate from the leaves and stems of the *Ilex paraguariensis* plant (a small tree in the holly family that grows in a limited area of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina). Historically, drinking yerba mate has been a communal affair for South Americans, a ritual that consists of passing a traditional gourd cup among family and friends until the liquid is drained. A special metal straw called a bombilla has a filter on one end to keep the loose herb from being sucked up along with the tea. Tourists witness this local custom and often are willing to give the drink a try; sometimes they acquire a taste for the drink or are swayed by tales of its medicinal value, then look for a retail source for the tea when they return home.

While the healthful properties of the drink have been believed to exist for centuries in South America, hard scientific data is just starting to emerge, and much of it has yet to be confirmed. A 1995 study published in an Australian journal concluded that mate does have strong antioxidant properties; a 2005 study at the University of Illinois reached the same conclusion. Investigators from the Pasteur Institute found useful amounts of vitamins, minerals and amino acids in the plant, and at least one team of researchers has isolated natural antimicrobial components. (Claims that yerba mate is the “ideal” weight loss tool, however, are currently completely unsubstantiated.) As research continues, it’s very likely that yerba mate will surpass green tea in terms of health benefits. As one enthusiast puts it, how could all those indigenous people have been wrong for hundreds of years?

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FOR ALL OF YOU SPELLING GEEKS:

The word “mate” is sometimes spelled “maté” with an accent mark to give it a foreign flavor and to differentiate it from the English word with the same spelling. Technically, this is incorrect, as the word in Spanish is pronounced MAH-tay, with the emphasis on the first syllable.



PRODUCTS AND PREPARATION

Yerba mate comes in a dizzying array of forms and flavors and can be prepared using a wide variety of methods. Popular flavorings include mint, lemon, vanilla and chai spice. There's also a selection of blends that combine yerba mate with other ingredients, like rooibos, green tea, cocoa and roasted ramón nut (which gives the beverage a coffee-like flavor and is marketed by Guayakí as Java Mate). While the choices might seem confusing, they also offer flexibility and give café owners the chance to weigh options. "I think the fact it has so much versatility is a benefit," says Stefan Schachter, founder of EcoTeas.

Preparation techniques for mate depend on which form of the product you purchase.

THE OPTIONS ARE:

TEA BAGS. If your mate sales are low in volume, this may be the easiest way to prepare and serve it on an individual basis, according to Schachter.

Jay Marchant, general manager of the Moka House Coffee chain in British Columbia, offers a seasonal option: "There's a fair amount of people who enjoy the mint one in summertime with cold water. You can leave the bag in the water and it doesn't over-extract; it's very refreshing."

LOOSE TEA. This option has the highest profit margins and may be the most versatile: you can brew tea directly into an airpot for a "featured tea of the day" selection, or use a French press or fine mesh infuser to prepare one or two drinks at a time. It's also possible to pack loose tea in a double portafilter to draw shots of yerba mate; just top with hot water to make a "mate americano."

Barista Teile Botting of the Tree-House Café in British Columbia says, "We use loose tea and we run it through the espresso machine. Our most popular mate drink is the

americano. We keep running hot water through it until it fills the cup, like drawing a very long espresso." Experts suggest moistening the loose tea with cool water before brewing, regardless of which method you use.

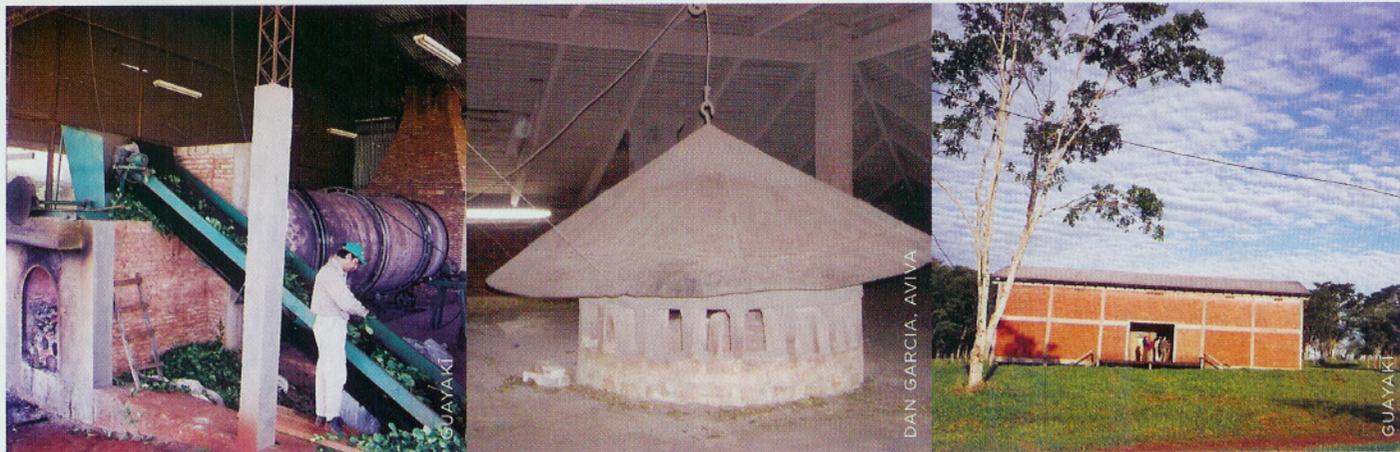
CONCENTRATE. Anyone who has prepared chai lattes on a regular basis will find this is an easy, familiar option. Most mate concentrates have some amount of sweetener, and many are spiced as well. They are designed to be mixed in equal proportions with milk or soy to create a mate latte. A very spicy variety of concentrate is also available for "mate chai latte" drinks. While profit margins are lower with concentrate-based drinks, the ease of preparation and consistent quality they contribute to latte drinks are distinct advantages.

David Karr, founder of mate producer Guayakí, suggests mixing concentrate with hot water to make tea, and then adding flavored syrups. "You're going to be able to make all kinds of specialty beverages by adding flavors—that's where it gets fun and exotic. The most popular ones are vanilla bean, pumpkin spice and hazelnut," he advises. Marchant says one of his Moka House Coffee franchisees mixes equal parts mate concentrate and apple juice to make a cider-like drink. "That's one of the neat things about this product, the many ways it can be enjoyed."

READY TO DRINK (RTD). Bottled mate beverages are the newest version of the product and are designed to compete with "energy drinks" like Red Bull and Snapple.

PRESERVING HEALTH BENEFITS IN PREPARED DRINKS

Not everyone is in favor of using the espresso machine to brew mate, and some of the arguments against it are compelling. The perceived problem of cross-contaminating mate and coffee flavors in drinks can be avoided by



LEFT TO RIGHT: Mate is dried in a three-step process—*sopecadora*—flash heating mate like green tea to preserve antioxidants and to keep it green; a *barbaqua* is used for radiant heat; finally, aging in a cedar-lined chamber.

having a dedicated portafilter and brew head for mate, but if you do a low volume in mate drinks, letting that head go unused most of the time may not make economic sense. Also, points out McIntyre, “The equipment is built for one thing, and that’s coffee. It’s been refined for centuries by the Italians to pull coffee that’s been roasted specifically for use in that machine. There’s like zero science out there about what it takes to pull a good mate shot.”

Perhaps most importantly, McIntyre doesn’t believe that pulling short shots of mate allows for a good extraction of the energizing or nutritional components of the product, while a good concentrate is brewed long enough to draw out the antioxidants that are the main selling point to many consumers.

Paul Cattin, owner of the Pekoe Sip House in Boulder, Colo., stresses that mate should be steeped between 15 and 30 minutes to get the full health benefits. “We’ll keep it

steeping for 20 minutes, strain it at that point and use it as a concentrate base for the rest of the drinks,” he says. Cattin also makes his mate chai latte base from scratch. “We substitute mate for the black tea and add cinnamon, cloves and ginger to make a concentrate. We serve it with steamed milk and agave as a sweetener—that’s simply combining the allure of chai with the new mystique of mate.”

Profit margins for yerba mate drinks are generous. McIntyre estimates that for a 16-ounce mate latte that sells for \$3 or \$3.25, costs range from 97 cents to \$1.05 (80 to 85 cents for concentrate, seven or eight cents for milk, 10 to 12 cents for cup and lid). For a 16-ounce tea drink that sells for \$1.25, costs are roughly 10 cents for a tea bag or loose tea and 10 to 12 cents for the cup and lid.

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YERBA MATE

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KNOW WHAT YOU'RE BUYING

If your customer base demands organic options, it's easy enough to find third-party certified organic mate from distributors (no official fair-trade designation currently exists for yerba mate). And if you position your café as one that's concerned with the environment and sustainability, you'll want to avoid yerba mate that comes from traditional farms, which are often located on clear-cut forestland.

As with shade-grown coffee, there are ways of cultivating yerba mate that preserve the rainforest and provide habitat for migratory birds. In one model, only the understory of the forest is cleared, leaving the canopy intact. Mate produced this



Guayakí Preserve in Paraguay, next to soy plantation.

way may be labeled “shade-grown,” “forest-grown” or “sustainable harvest.” The term “wild harvest” means the forest has been left nearly entirely intact, with mate being harvested either from naturally occurring stands of plants or from plants that have been intercropped into the rainforest. Proponents of shade-grown mate agree that these products have a smoother flavor and higher nutritional value than farm-grown mate.

Traditional South American versions of mate contain both leaves and stems of the *Ilex paraguariensis* plant, and some importers have chosen to continue this tradition with their products. The trend, however, seems to be toward leaf-only mate products. There's also a debate over processing methods: Hot-air drying of leaves eliminates the smoky flavor that comes from fire drying and is preferred by some, though it comes down to a matter of personal preference.



Mate reforestation project, Argentina

MARKETING YERBA MATE

Much of mate's success to date has been the result of "buzz marketing," the word-of-mouth endorsements that have spread quickly among health-conscious consumers. One of the most frequently heard claims by those who've tried mate is that it stimulates and energizes like coffee without the negative side effects (jitteriness, acid stomach); these anecdotes obviously inspire curiosity among the uninitiated.

Of course, distributors want to see café owners succeed in selling mate drinks, and most are well prepared to lend a helping hand with your promotional efforts by supplying posters, window decals, informational leaflets, table tents and other point-of-sale materials. Inviting customers to sample mate drinks (no matter what they order) is also effective—brew up an airpot full of mate and hand out four-ounce samples. Make sure your staff is educated about mate as well: what it tastes like, how to make it properly and how it compares to coffee and tea.

David Karr of Guayakí predicts there will be a lot of press coming out soon about mate's healthful properties—a bonus to anyone's marketing efforts. 

A mate farmer sips the drink from a traditional *bombilla*.

