



Tonya Donati

St. Petersburg, Florida

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Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Tonya Donati:

Tonya Donati, Co-Founder and Managing Director of Mother Kombucha, first discovered Kombucha in 2007, well before consumption of the fermented tea, chock full of probiotics, antioxidants and other disease-fighting ingredients, was adopted by the mainstream. Even though her first experience wasn't what she expected, she eventually found a love for Kombucha and began home brewing her own. Towards the end of 2013, Donati had an opportunity to share her beverage with more than just family and friends.

"A friend of mine had a cold-pressed juice shop and wanted my Kombucha on tap for her customers," Donati said. "At the time, I was home with my kids, after working as an Occupational Therapist for 20 years, so I had time to redirect my interests towards health and

wellness. I was only in the early days of my home brewing, but she liked it and wanted it at her shop.”

Not only did Donati fulfill her friend’s request, she also started looking into the possibility of making Kombucha on a much bigger scale.

“I started researching the craft Kombucha industry, which was still pretty young at the time,” Donati said. “There were some small breweries in Florida, but none of them were licensed with the Department of Agriculture. Seeing how other cities and states had regional Kombucha brands and realizing that everything I was drinking was coming from California, it just seemed like an opportunity I needed to seriously look into.”

Donati did not have a background in manufacturing. However, what she did have was a business plan with a big vision and plenty of positive energy. She rented a corner of a small commercial kitchen and started selling her Kombucha at the St. Pete Saturday Farmer’s Market. She got validation and feedback from customers and organically grew the business one keg at a time.

“We worked out of that space for a little over a year,” Donati said. “We then got a small SBA loan and worked with the Small Business Development Center to get our own 2,500 sqft brewing facility. Having this space allowed us to bottle and wholesale our Kombucha to independent grocers and eventually regional grocery chains.”

From Startup to Second Stage

Towards the end of 2017, after a couple years of steady growth, Mother

Kombucha began building out their next phase – a 13,000 sqft facility.

The expansion, which includes a recent addition of 3,000 sqft in production space, fueled further growth and put Donati and her team in a position to provide their beverage to major chains such as Publix and Whole Foods. Even though growth, for the most part, was gradual, it still provided Donati with a unique challenge.

“Going from a craft artisan, making Kombucha for farmer’s markets, to producing a product in a manufacturing facility, and everything that goes with that, was certainly a challenge,” she said. “There are so many moving parts and no one on our team had a true background in manufacturing. Another challenge was funding. We didn’t start out with a large equity source. It wasn’t easy, but it did make us scrappy and creative with how we approached and continue to approach things.”

Mother Kombucha’s competitive edge over other companies in the Kombucha industry primarily comes down to their ingredients. They’re lowest in calories and sugar amongst regional and national competitors and their beverages also contain adaptogenic herbs. These herbs are designed to naturally lower cortisol levels, helping to reduce stress.

Donati explained Mother Kombucha’s marketing strategy and their approach to building loyal customers. “Our focus is always on getting people to taste our Kombucha,” she said. “How do we get this product in front of someone and in their mouth? A largest portion of our marketing budget is spent on this. Through demonstrations, events, food and wine festivals, yoga festivals, vegetarian festivals and various running events, we educate the consumer and teach them why we’re different.”

Mother Kombucha currently has 20 employees, consisting of a full-time,

part-time and some seasonal workers. According to Donati, the workplace culture is defined by family, work-life balance and creating an organization that gives back to its employees and the community.

“We always put family first,” she said. “We also believe in creating a work environment that allows people to define their passions and strengths. We then mold positions to fit their abilities. We’ve had people in marketing end up in brewing or others start out in sales and go to production. We provide a lot of flexibility and try to build a culture of feedback where everyone can contribute. We’re also working towards becoming a Certified B Corporation. This means we want to be profitable, but also believe in using our business as a force for good. We pay all of our employees at or above the living wage for Pinellas County and 100% of our food waste is composted.”

Donati continued, “When it comes to community involvement and philanthropic activities, we support many organizations through in-kind donations and by participating in their events. Our primary focus is on the needs of children and women and clean food sourcing.”

According to Donati, operating in the Tampa/St. Pete region is beneficial for a number of reasons. “The growth we’re experiencing in this region in the food and beverage industry is great,” she said. “The timing was perfect for us. It’s also a very friendly community with opportunities for mentorship and guidance. We even have access to great schools like Eckerd College that sell our products on campus and supply us with graduates that are aligned with our mission.”

What it Means to be a Florida Companies to Watch Honoree

“We have such a motivated team and they’re so passionate about our product,” Donati said. “A lot of the employees who worked for us in the early days are still with us now. To be recognized for something like this, on such a big scale, makes them so proud. We’ve all worked hard. It feels great!”

Donati continued, “In terms of why we were selected, I think it’s a combination of our deep roots in the community and our rapid growth. I think people find that intriguing. A big thanks goes out to Tammie Sweet and Stuart Rogel for their continued support and for recognizing our efforts.”

Looking ahead, Donati’s future goals for Mother Kombucha are to continue to grow the business in a sustainable way. Taking care of family, employees and the community are front and center priorities. Continued innovation, in a rapidly growing and changing industry, is also one of Donati’s goals.

Advice for Aspiring Entrepreneurs

“Have a good plan, but plan to be flexible with that plan,” Donati said. “Also, get really comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable all the time. Being an entrepreneur is about constant change. It’s important to find that thrilling rather than frightening.”

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