

A climb up Pirate Jake's ladder

Pirate Jake won't forget the first time he downed a pint of yerba mate.

"I was in the middle of the whole spring allergy season," recalled the urban plunderer otherwise known as Jacob Young. "I had two glasses of it, and within an hour and a half I felt better. Nothing had worked so well before. Yerba mate really knocked it out."

Forget the bottle of rum—well, maybe not.

Let's be clear. Pirate Jake's is not your hippie father's health drink. Yes, it's natural and organic, keeping scurvy at bay, for sure—but Jake's bottled yerba mate has a style all its own that doesn't play by the rules. Go ahead, mix it with rum.

"Damn, I was about to fall off the ledge there," Young said, recounting others' reactions to the only all-natural drink fit for a biker bar. "It literally changes the whole drinking game."

Yerba mate changed it long ago. The Spanish were the ones who first named the holly-like wonder plant of South America. Conquistadors would enjoy the plant's native drink—culled from yerba's dry leaves and twigs—after a hard day's pillaging.

But yerba is even older than that.

"It was discovered by the native tribes down there thousands of years ago," Young said.

"They call it the drink of the gods. Shamans use it for the base of their potions. Many years later, Jesuit priests showed up and tried to use it to proselytize because yerba mate is such a powerful thing. It makes you feel awesome."

Perhaps it's the antioxidants, the amino acids, the vitamins or the minerals. Or maybe it's just the cool way you look hoisting a pirate beverage.

Drinking nature from a hollow gourd and passing it around may have been traditional for the indigenous, as well as for pirates, punk-band houses and earthy religious sects—but today, versions of the drink are sold in a steep-and-drink natural-foods context, often in unattractive packaging gathering dust next to the horny goat weed.

"There's a whole sociological aspect to this," Young said.

So how do you take all this ethnic-health history and put it in a metaphorical bottle?

For one thing, you put it in a literal bottle.

"People need something more edgy looking," Young explained. "That kind of health-food branding just wasn't going to take it to the next level as far as I was concerned. I knew putting it in a bottle was the way to go."

But aarrgh! That meant a more expensive production.

Well worth it, says Young, who has a history of doing things his own way and making the odd job even odder. He still runs what he calls the tiniest barbershop in Denver.

"It's another pirate business," he said.

When the frustrated barber inexplicably found himself with his first abandoned booty—a sack of yerba mate, as a sort of payment on a bad debt—Young became an unlikely entrepreneur.

Aye, what this drink needed was a pirate.

Young would launch his first ship in the most unlikely of seas, using a bicycle cart as his sloop and dodging constables and enemy ships under his flag of homebrewed yerba mate. For a time, he even nicked the trademark of a better known Hollywood pirate and helped himself to the unwitting "investments" of major retailers.

"I made just enough money to stay alive," Young said of his bootlegging days. "You do what you can with what you got to the best of your abilities."

Young has not gotten into that kind of trouble since launching his now-bottled Pirate Jake's

in 2012 and bumping up the cool factor of an esoteric health drink. In recent years, the unlikely businessman has won several entrepreneurial awards, including a New Venture Feasibility prize.

“I thought, I’m a smart dude. I can be like really good or I can be really evil and get away with it. I started thinking, yeah, businesses do things—they change things,” he said.

The resulting beverage with a conscience would become popular among Young’s fellow students on Denver’s Auraria Campus, especially those seeking clear focused energy for their final exams—and something to mix with the vodka stash afterwards.

Today, a four-man crew concocts Jake’s organic buried treasure—mixing yerba with brown sugar, hibiscus, elderberries and orange peel—in an industrial kitchen, before shipping out Pirate Jake’s to coffee shops, breweries and retail stores.

As Young moves his ship into larger waters, swimming with the sharks is the last thing on his list of things to worry about.

“People who drink mate love me. It’s like a club,” the pirate said of his yerba hearties. “If I were to ask someone in a bar, do you drink mate?—if one guy does, we’re like buddies in a way. We find some common ground.”

His yerba mateys, as it were.