

Happy Gut equals happy heart

By [Daniel J. Kushner @danieljkushner](#)

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- PHOTO BY JACOB WALSH
- Rob Heffner and Catt Hsu designed their kombucha taproom, Happy Gut Sanctuary, to cultivate a sense of community.

There are plenty of places to drink kombucha in Rochester, but very few of them feel like home. Happy Gut Sanctuary is an exception.

To walk into its taproom in the Hungerford Building is to feel at peace. The walls are a clean white, and the brightness of the room is grounded in the natural greenery of plants thoughtfully placed just so. It feels like a spa, without the aromatherapy.

I settled in at the far end of the bar on a summer night when there was an open mic hosted by NAMI Rochester, a support group for people with mental illness. As someone who has struggled with depression and bipolar disorder, I was heartened to find a forum — in a kombucha bar, of all places — for people like me to express themselves.

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Among the customers who trickled in was Rachael Gootnick, a Rochester artist who restores antique books at her nearby Hungerford studio and a first-timer at Happy Gut. She frequently attends open mic nights around town to hear poetry, and that night was no exception.

Gootnick wasn't prepared to share her own poetry, including the poem she keeps in her wallet called "An Eye for Beauty," a piece about a past

relationship and the effect of society's beauty standards on women. No audience had ever heard it.

But the energy in the room coaxed her out of her shell, and the next thing she knew, she was baring her soul to strangers.

"I felt like it was a roomful of non-judgmental people who would understand the messaging behind the poem that I read," Gootnick says.

She has been to a few Happy Gut open mics since and found that what she describes as a sense of community has become even warmer and more welcoming.

"Just the fact that they host a mental health open mic, I think, says volumes," Gootnick says. "They're willing to have those kinds of conversations and they're willing to facilitate that kind of environment for people that maybe are on the fence about sharing how they feel."

The "sanctuary" in Happy Gut Sanctuary [click to enlarge](#)
was no accident.

The bar's proprietor couple, Catt Hsu and Rob Heffner, recall having felt like outsiders during the formative years in their lives and set out to create in Happy Gut a refuge for people who feel out of place.

While it calls itself a "taproom and bar," Happy Gut distinguishes itself from cocktail lounges, clubs, and watering holes that specialize in alcohol-soaked outings by offering an array of non-

alcoholic fermented teas.

“Having these alternative spaces that have more of that trendy taproom feel — I like how Happy Gut calls their space a taproom — it still feels like you’re going out to a bar, so to speak,” Irondequoit resident Rachel Snyder says. “But the focus isn’t on alcohol, it’s around community.”

There is a comforting, if unpolished and industrial quality to Happy Gut’s space at the Hungerford, to which the business moved in December 2020. Happy Gut sits behind a door marked “6A.” The pillars that hold up its ceiling are scarred with age. The Hungerford Building was once a syrup manufacturing plant for J.

Hungerford Smith — the company that created the flavoring for A&W Root Beer.

The history is ironic given that the only sugars in Happy Gut beverages are those that come about naturally as a result of fermentation. There are no artificial sweeteners.

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- PHOTO PROVIDED
- "It's important that we foster a space and environment where you can feel welcomed and at home, no matter what your background is," Hsu says.



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That doesn't mean that Happy Gut tea isn't sweet. There's Amaterasu, a Japanese Sencha green tea with a bright, slightly lemony flavor. There's also the sweet, mango-tinged Mary's Gold, made with Nilgiri tea and calendula petals.

Selling tea keeps the lights on at Happy Gut, but there is the distinct sense that there is more to the place. In addition to the monthly NAMI open mics — designed to encourage an open dialogue about mental health issues — Happy Gut has hosted an ASL training session for workers in the service industry.

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- PHOTO PROVIDED
- Happy Gut Sanctuary hosts an ASL training session for workers in the service industry.

Hsu and Heffner seem keen to make Happy Gut an inclusive haven where people feel accepted, and their own past experiences have a lot to do with it.

Heffner, 38, was born to a Korean mother and a Native American father who served in the military. Growing up, Heffner recalls feeling out of place anywhere other than a base. When his dad retired, the family moved from South Dakota to New York — where the sense of community he once felt was absent.

“Civilian life is more about self than helping others, from my initial experience, so I’ve always been more about giving than taking, and trying to help others,” Heffner says.

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- PHOTO BY JACOB WALSH
- "I also want to operate as more than just a business," says Catt Hsu of Happy Gut Sanctuary. "I really do want to offer our space to whoever might need it."

Hsu, 32, was raised Catholic and lived mostly in Taiwan until she was 10, when she moved to the United States and resided in Texas for six years. Her family participated in community service through a nearby Chinese church — helping out at nursing homes, soup kitchens, and homes that housed single mothers and their children.

Hsu's family stressed the importance of service. But she says she found motivation in connecting with people, especially as a kid from Taiwan who felt like an outsider.

“So it’s important that we foster a space and environment where you can feel welcomed and at home, no matter what your background is,” she says of Happy Gut.

In Taiwan, Hsu says, high-quality tea was inexpensive and easy to get. That wasn’t her experience in America, where tea is often either prepackaged or combined with loads of sugar or milk as opposed to the loose-leaf varieties she and Heffner use at Happy Gut.

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- PHOTO PROVIDED
- Happy Gut Sanctuary's new taproom in the Hungerford building rotates some 20 different kinds of fermented tea, served either on tap or in bottles.

Happy Gut’s beverages are different from the vinegary sweet, conventional

American kombucha readily found in grocery stores. They are front-loaded with plenty of tanginess, but don't necessarily taste like tea.

"It's not like 'strawberry this' or 'blueberry that,'" Hsu says of her drinks. "So I was really worried that people weren't going to be about it. We're just literally fermenting different teas that we find really unique and complex and special."

But Happy Gut's flavors have gained a following. The place rotates some 20 different kinds of fermented tea, served either on tap or in bottles. When the business first opened in July 2018 on Park Avenue, there were five options on the menu.

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Like the fermentation process, growing a business takes patience and time. So does growing a community.

"I also want to operate as more than just a business," she says. "I really do want to offer our space up to whoever might need it."

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