



Photo by Anne Stokes

# BACK TO THEIR ROOTS

## Friends are introducing kava to Northern California

by **Steph Rodriguez**

**F**or more than 3,000 years, Polynesian culture has shared and enjoyed sips of kava. Now, the murky, root-based drink is making waves in Northern California, where many have discovered its calming benefits upon visiting The Root of Happiness Kava Bar in Rancho Cordova.

**"It tastes earthy and kind of rooty. It's definitely an acquired taste."**

Tyler Blythe, The Root of Happiness Kava Bar co-owner

"I remember drinking it the first time and was blown away. I thought, 'What an incredible effect, what a wonderful feeling,'" says Travis Lowin, co-owner of the bar. "It's an excellent plant and every single time, it's been a really pleasurable experience."

Lowin and co-owner Tyler Blythe are longtime friends who are stirring things up by educating curious customers on the benefits of this age-old peppery plant.

"Over the years, Tyler and I started studying ethno-botanicals and amongst the different plants, we started taking a look at kava in terms of its medicinal value," Lowin says.

Kava contains a compound called kavalactones, which provide the plant's soothing and relaxing

effects. Blythe and Lowin see kava as a natural alternative to help people with stress and anxiety disorders. But anyone who wants to simply unwind can enjoy a cup or "shell" of kava, and they may even find it an acceptable alternative to alcohol.

"It's difficult for a lot of people to remember what it feels like to relax," Blythe says.

Blythe and Lowin hope patrons find that place to relax at their bar, which features warm lighting, ambient music and comfy, leather booths. Patrons find The Root of Happiness a more subdued experience compared to the louder, crowded bar scene.

The big question on many first-time visitors' minds is what does this stuff taste like?

"It's a member of the pepper family, so it's naturally going to have a bit of spiciness to it. And, of course, the numbing sensation is unlike any other food that you might have tried," Blythe says. "It tastes earthy and kind of rooty. It's definitely an acquired taste. It's no different than drinking your first cup of black coffee or a pint of beer."

**"It relaxes people and gets them to open up and socialize."**

Travis Lowin, The Root of Happiness Kava Bar co-owner

There are many ways to lessen the bitter flavors so beginners can appreciate kava's effects. Blythe and Lowin offer raw kava flavored with chai or chocolate or flavored shots, which contain concentrated kava blended with strawberry or peach Torani syrups.

Both Blythe and Lowin believe kava is not just a product to be consumed — it's a shared experience.

"When people come together around kava, it's in a very positive way," Lowin says. "It relaxes people and gets them to open up and socialize."

Tyler Blythe, left, and Travis Lowin, right, enjoy educating and sharing their passion for kava with patrons at their bar, The Root of Happiness.

## Entwined in Culture

### Mythical origins of kava

**G**rown and consumed throughout Polynesia, Melanesia and even some parts of Micronesia, kava is deeply rooted in thousands of years of culture. In fact, some cultures have myths to explain this mysterious plant's presence in our world. One myth tells of orphaned twins, a brother and sister, who loved each other very much. One night, the boy had to protect his sister from a stranger who asked the girl to marry him. She refused, and in the struggle, the rebuffed suitor shot an arrow that killed the

sister. The brother buried his beloved sister, and a week later, a strange plant grew from the grave. The boy did not remove it, but continued to mourn his sister for a year. One day, he observed a rat chew on the plant and appear to "die." Hoping to end his pain of existence, he too consumed the plant. He did not die, but discovered he forgot his unhappiness. He came back often to eat the magic root and taught others how to use it. **SR**

Source: "History, Folklore, Traditional and Current Uses of Kava," by Lamont Lindstrom

# WHERE DOES KAVA COME FROM?

by Steph Rodriguez  
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## Root of Happiness sources kava from Vanuatu, Fiji, Hawaii and beyond

**K**nown as the home of kava, the Republic of Vanuatu is the largest producer of this calming plant throughout the South Pacific and pretty much the entire world. Kava originating from Vanuatu is not community grown, but individually, so the growers directly receive all the profits from their labor of love. Although kava is Vanuatu's cash crop, the kava shrub is also cultivated and shipped from Fiji, Tonga, the Samoas and Micronesia.

The real fruits of this magic plant can be found underground in the lateral roots and rootlets. Once harvested, these parts are chopped into manageable pieces, dried and ground into a pulp. From there, the kava pulp is mixed with water and then strained through a mesh straining cloth. Now it's ready to be served, sipped and enjoyed.

At The Root of Happiness Kava Bar, all kava is carefully selected from sources in Vanuatu, Fiji,

Hawaii and other locations in order to ensure the best quality. Twice a year, co-owner Tyler Blythe travels to the Big Island in Hawaii with his family and hand picks choice organic kava varieties. That harvest ends up on the menu in his bar — picked fresh from the ground and brought back home.



Tyler Blythe inspects a black hiwa kava plant in Hawaii.

Photo courtesy of Tyler Blythe

## Escape to KAVA COUNTRY

### Patrons say the kava experience is about more than just the drink

**K**ava is an acquired taste. But once they down their first miso-soup sized bowl of the earthy liquid, customers say they understand its appeal.

"With me, the effects of [kava] really got me drawn in. It made the taste of it not so important anymore," says Russ Bechthold, who visits multiple times a week. "Not drinking [alcohol] anymore, it's a nice alternative to have something a little more natural that's not hard on the body. I'm able to relax and still drive home. That's what I like about it."

Beyond the beverage, kava is also about finding sanctuary in the bar's tranquil environment. With cushioned, leather

couches surrounding the gigantic Jenga tower, wooden totem poles and Polynesian décor, customers looking for an alternative to the typical bar or club scene find peace here while satisfying the need for a dose of nightlife.

"[Kava] has really nice calming effects. Sometimes, you need to get rid of that edge from a hard day, and it's perfect," Joey Melrose says, sipping on a shell of kava on the back patio.

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Joey Melrose, Root of Happiness customer

The drink also creates a shared experience among patrons of all different backgrounds. Men and women, young and old, yoga instructors and heavy metal drummers — they all find common ground at a bar that revolves around socializing, not hooking up.

For Brianne Giatras, that's part of the place's charm.

"I feel totally comfortable coming in here by myself because the owners let me know one night, 'This is not a meat market. This is not a pick-up bar. This is a place where we want everyone, no matter sex, age or look, to be able to come and relax,'" she says. **SR**

Brianne Giatras and Joey Melrose say The Root of Happiness is a comfortable, safe place to unwind after a long day.



Russ Bechthold says kava is a nice alternative to drinking alcohol.

Photos by Anne Stokes



# EXPERIENCE KAVA

Menu has plenty of ways to get your kava on by **Steph Rodriguez**

**T**he Root of Happiness Kava Bar offers many ways to enjoy this culturally celebrated beverage. The staff has some creative ways to mask kava's peppery and punchy flavor for first-time tasters. The bar's diverse menu is not just packed full of all things kava, but also lists coffee, tea, ginsengs, sparkling juices and even island-style food among its many options. Here's a guide to help you experience kava culture.



## A TASTE OF PASTE:

A potent concentrate mixed with honey and lemon enjoyed under the tongue. The kava paste bypasses the digestive system taken this way and the effects are instantaneous.



Kava in its natural and ground forms.

## TRADITIONAL KAVA DRINKS:

Traditionally prepared kava is what customers can expect at this bar, soaked in warm water for more than an hour and kneaded through fine mesh to remove all the pulp and fiber of the root.

### High and Low Tides:

When ordering a shell of kava at The Root of Happiness, there are two size options: a high tide (8 ounces) and a low tide (4 ounces). Add a flavored shot of syrup to pack in more flavor.



### Sledge Hammer:

A Sledge Hammer is a 4-ounce shell of house kava that boasts serious potency and is equivalent to three to four standard shells of kava. If a strong punch is desired at the end of a long day, this is a great option and tastes even better with a little coconut water added.

## HARD KAVA SHOT:

This option comes in many flavors like strawberry, peach, passion-fruit and more. If the peppery and earth-like notes of kava sound intimidating to the palate, start off with one of these to hide the taste.



## KOMBUCHA, COFFEE, TEA AND MORE:

From authentic Mayan hot chocolate to dozens of green, white and other exotic teas, this bar goes beyond kava. Try one of the multiple seasonal varieties of kombucha on tap from Lev's, Sierra, Búcha and TheBu. If hunger strikes, indulge in the island-style menu that includes pork, chicken, coconut shrimp and vegetarian rice bowls. Choose from brown or jasmine rice and your choice of toppings tossed in an island teriyaki-style glaze. For dessert, sample one of the kava-infused chocolate bars in either milk or dark chocolate.

## VISIT THE ROOT OF HAPPINESS KAVA BAR



1949 Zinfandel Drive • Rancho Cordova, CA • 916-468-8189

Hours: 7 p.m. - 1 a.m. every day

Wednesday nights are Ladies Nights with \$1 shots and shells for women.

Monday nights all-you-can-drink shells for \$20.

Visit [www.facebook.com/therootofhappineesskavabar](http://www.facebook.com/therootofhappineesskavabar) for more information on theme nights, specials and additional menu items.