Neglect and missed opportunity in NZ’s untapped kava market

Mackenzie Smith

New Zealand is being described as dropping the ball on a kava business renaissance as local importers struggle to meet a growing demand with global opportunity.

Kava, a muddy and mildly soporific drink made from the ground root of a pepper plant grown in the western Pacific, is central to many Pacific island cultures but has experienced a surge in the West in recent years.

More than 100 ‘kava bars’ have popped up across the US as the beverage is marketed as a healthy and social alternative to alcohol in new markets.

In New Zealand, there has been something of a boom too, in domestic and traditional kava circles, due to a large Pacific Island population, but it’s struggling to meet supply and maintain quality.

Waikato University’s Apo Aporosa, an expert in kava cultural practice, says research he conducted in 2013 estimated 30,000 consumers of kava in New Zealand.

“I’d say that’s conservative now. I’d say we’re looking at a lot more. So there is definitely a demand but the current demand in New Zealand is outstripping supply.”

The kava economy

Fiji and Vanuatu are the major producers and exporters of kava in the Pacific and there have been soars as they struggle to cater to locals as well as a growing global demand.

Vanuatu exports about $10 million worth of kava each year, its third largest export commodity, and Fiji exports about $3.6m.

Figures from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation show Fiji exported 41 tonnes of kava to New Zealand in 2013, worth about

Dr Aporosa, who has experience growing and importing kava, says there is “massive business potential” in New Zealand for kava importation and distribution.

But he says those entering the industry for the first time should be wary of low-quality product on the market.

Kava is sometimes harvested prematurely, poorly processed or cut with cheaper additives like sawdust, flour or toxic parts of the plant that grow above ground. Mouldy product is also commonly found.
Supply also struggles to meet demand because of the three years it takes crops to mature and the difficulties caused by cyclones and other bad weather in the Pacific.

“Generally, kava demand has been increasing dramatically and supply hasn’t been increasing as much, mainly because it takes so long to grow kava,” says Zbigniew Dumieniski, director of The Kava Society, an Auckland-based kava importer and distributor.

“Kava has a big potential and I think that it’s funny that it’s becoming so popular in America and all these bars are emerging whereas in New Zealand, prices have increased, and quality has decreased,” Dr Dumieniski says.

Unique potential in New Zealand
Another reason for calls for New Zealand to do more in kava is its ‘unique’ kava-friendly importing laws, which treat the root as a food substance rather than a dietary supplement as in the US where it’s not strictly legal to sell the mixed drink.

“New Zealand should be at the forefront of these changes because we are so close to the Pacific and we have the right legislation and good infrastructure when it comes to processing food products,” Dr Dumieniski says.

He says New Zealand could become a hub for making high-quality kava and exporting it to a global market.

This isn’t helped by a debate raging over whether westerners are appropriating Pacific culture by consuming kava. Dr Aporosai says this may explain why kava bars aren’t popping up in New Zealand.

“For a lot of Pacific kava drinkers, the idea of a bar is something that’s a bit uncomfortable and I think that uncomfortableness is rubbing off on the non-Pacific kava users here,” he says.

But these are views kava advocates are keen to dismantle in a bid to meet local demand and promote the Pacific beverage in New Zealand.

“I think kava is a great product and a very interesting product and it’s quite surprising it hasn’t become more popular among non-Pacific consumers,” Dr Dumieniski says.