

Kava trade and retail

By SAMANTHA RINA

KAVA is an important agricultural commodity for a number of Pacific Island countries, forming an integral part of cultural, economic and social life.

About 30,000 households are involved in its cultivation in Vanuatu, with a further 3000 earning an income from the kava trade and retail (*nakamal*) operations.

Kava is widely consumed in Vanuatu and Fiji, but is also exported to countries such as New Zealand, New Caledonia, the US, and the EU.

There has been great interest in kava as a “nutraceutical”, a herbal alternative to pharmaceutical sleeping and anti-anxiety pills because of kava’s soporific and calming qualities.

The global nutraceuticals market is valued in the billions of dollars.

A regional quality standard

A milestone agreement was reached at a regional meeting of the Codex Alimentarius (or Codex) Commission.

This body sets global food standards, guidelines and codes of practice (known as the Codex) aimed at ensuring the safety of food traded internationally.

The Codex Commission is supported by a Secretariat which is managed by two UN bodies — the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) — and is based in Rome.

Regional chapters of the Codex Commission meet to discuss regional food safety standards, and it was the FAO/WHO Co-ordinating Committee for North America and South West Pacific that met in Vanuatu in September, and agreed to develop a new regional standard for kava.

The Codex agreement is a significant step that holds renewed promise for the future of the kava industry.

Support from the PHAMA program

The pathway to this point has been a long and winding one. There has been talk of developing a regional standard for kava for many years.

Given the importance of kava to Pacific livelihoods and its significant market and export potential, the Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access (PHAMA) Program, an Australian Government initiative, co-funded by the New Zealand Government has been providing market access assistance for kava for about two years.

In Vanuatu, the first step was to bring the various government and private sector players together to form a Kava Industry Working Group (KIWG). PHAMA provided support to the KIWG to develop an industry strategy outlining priority areas for development.

In Fiji, industry co-operation was made easier by the existence of the Yaqona Taskforce, with which PHAMA partners. Number one on the list of priorities for the industry in both countries was the need to rebuild the image of kava following a ban on kava imports put in place by the EU because of health concerns raised by various pieces of research.

The EU ban (since lifted in 2015 following subsequent research) had a devastating effect on exports of kava from the region.

Documenting varieties

In order to rebuild kava’s image, PHAMA, the KIWG and the Yaqona Taskforce recognised the importance of demonstrating the quality of exported kava.



Vanuatu Kava Industry Working Group and Yaqona taskforce. Picture: SUPPLIED



A kava nursery. Picture: SUPPLIED



Kava preparation is common in most Pacific Island countries. Picture: SUPPLIED

There are over 80 varieties of kava in Vanuatu and 13 in Fiji.

All of the varieties in Fiji are “noble” varieties, but in Vanuatu there is a mixture of noble, wild and what is termed “*tudei*” varieties.

Question marks remain about the safety of consuming *tudei* and wild varieties of kava, indicating the importance of being able to distinguish between noble and other varieties.

The way kava is harvested and dried is also important, as certain parts of the plant should not be used and poor drying can lead to mould and aflatoxin contamination.

Given this context, stakeholders in both Fiji and Vanuatu requested PHAMA’s assistance in undertaking research into the varieties of kava grown locally.

In Vanuatu, this research was conducted by renowned kava expert, Dr Vincent Lebot, who documented the 80+ varieties grown in Vanuatu and identified the different chemical properties of the varieties such as the level of kavalactones.

Similar research was supported by PHAMA in Fiji in partnership with Mr Usaia Dolodolotawake at the University of the South Pacific.

Promoting quality kava cultivation

Following on from this, PHAMA

then worked with the KIWG in Vanuatu and the Yaqona Taskforce in Fiji to develop a quality assurance system for kava in each country.

Comprehensive kava quality manuals and awareness materials have been developed for distribution to farmers in each country, outlining how to produce quality kava products for export.

In Vanuatu, PHAMA is partnering with the kava industry, government and FAO to disseminate the PHAMA materials and provide training for farmers.

The efforts of PHAMA and its partners have raised awareness of correct production, processing and storage at all levels of the value chain. Fiji meanwhile is feeling the devastating effects of Severe TC Winston, which destroyed about 55 per cent of the kava crop.

Thought is being given to how production can be rejuvenated such as through the development of kava nurseries, distribution of planting material and other support to farmers.

A test to regulate exports

PHAMA also teamed up again with Dr Lebot on the development of a simple and cost effective kava quality test.

This colour test can be used by exporters and regulatory authorities across the region to distinguish between noble and other va-

rieties of kava.

The development of practical and economical quality testing tools like this will enable more effective quality assurance along the value chain.

National quality standards

Exports cannot be regulated if legislation is not in place or if farmers and exporters have not been made aware of quality requirements.

PHAMA has therefore worked with the governments in Vanuatu and Fiji to develop their own national quality standards for kava.

In Vanuatu, the national standard has been widely consulted and is soon to come into force through an amendment to the Kava Act.

Fiji is also close to finalising its standard following consultations with farmers and industry in June and July 2016.

The Fiji Yaqona Taskforce and Ministry of Agriculture have also identified the need to progress legislation to formalise the representative industry body, provide a basis for quality standards and develop an industry plan for kava.

Pacific collaboration

All stakeholders recognise that the Pacific kava producing countries need to work together to promote quality exports.

If one country exports poor quality kava, and this results in

restrictions by importing countries, it risks affecting exports of kava from other Pacific countries.

For Vanuatu, that could mean the loss of \$US7 million (\$F14.43m) of annual exports.

This underlines the importance of developing a regional standard that is informed by the work already undertaken on national standards.

This is why PHAMA supported a number of Pacific Island countries to prepare for and attend the recent regional Codex Commission meeting in Port Vila.

While tangible progress has been made at the national level, the process for developing a regional Codex standard has only just begun.

The development and finalisation of a regional standard could take a few years. PHAMA expects to continue its support on the development of this standard, but will also cement its work in Fiji and Vanuatu to promote the quality of kava production and exports that are so important to the livelihoods of so many people.

■ Samantha Rina is the communications officer for the Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access (PHAMA) Program, which is an Australian Government initiative, co-funded by the New Zealand Government.

Foreign lawyer

RNZI - In Samoa, a foreign lawyer has been selected to prosecute the suspended police commissioner’s case. Fuiavailili Egon Keil, pictured, is facing four criminal charges over an unlawful arrest by the police of a man at the Fugalei market last year including one charge of unlawful detention.



Solo swimmers

The swim is actually capturing a lot of people’s imagination in Australia because it is a good way to do a 10km race.

PAUL ELLERCAMP — SPORTS: PAGE 89

Holiday traffic

RNZI - Traffic out of Auckland and Wellington is beginning to build up, with police warning motorists heading away for the long weekend to take extra care. The NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) said traffic was already starting to get heavy on Auckland’s Southern Motorway.

