**A new kava high**

The evolution of kava

**By SAMANTHA RINA**

KAVA bar in the US, a nascent in Vanuatu and that "baby mix" any day of the week in Fiji all share the same thing in common: kava. Not just any kava, what’s in demand is quality kava.

Quality is the new buzzword across kava-producing Pacific Island countries and a motivating factor for kava growers, processors and exporters to lift their game, grow and produce better kava that now fetches in domestic and global markets.

With the evolution of kava from a ceremonial drink to an essential cash crop sold to domestic and export markets around the world, kava industries have had to prioritise improvements to quality along the production and marketing chains.

To support this effort, the Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access (PHAMA) Program, an Australian and New Zealand-funded aid-for-trade program, has partnered with governments in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu to develop national kava quality standards and manuals explaining production and processing methods, a practical and cost-effective testing method and consumer awareness activities.

With tens of thousands of people in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu dependent on the kava trade for their livelihood, the work to improve quality is all the more crucial for the Pacific kava industry.

In Fiji, the kava is a $283 million economy with domestic sales valued at 92 per cent and exports at 8 per cent. Based on 2015 statistics, more than 20,000 farms or 32 per cent of all rural households grow kava.

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In Vanuatu, PHAMA’s work has helped to improve the quality of the kava trade in Vanuatu and has been a culturally significant move that could prevent a repeat of kava bans such as that imposed by the US due to the presence of the banned compound quinolizidine alkaloids.

A delicate plant, kava requires specific care and attention at each step. With all the initiatives and support being made for the growing Pacific kava industry, quality is today the most business plan across the isles.

**NATIONAL FEATURE**

Nursery expert Sant Kumar, right, visits kava grower Vani Naucukidi to inspect her nursery in Lovoni Village, Ovalau. Vani has helped kava farmers restore their cyclone-affected farms by selling kava seedlings. Picture: SUPPLIED

**Technical support**

PHAMA’s support for Pacific kava is in line with its objectives to maintain and improve existing market access by developing the capacity of the kava industry to meet market requirements, including compliance with international food safety standards.

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In Vanuatu, PHAMA’s work has contributed to maintaining over $718 million in kava exports from Vanuatu to the end of 2020.

**Fiji**

Ms Naucukidi, who have benefited from PHAMA’s support, are now leading the way with a new farming approach. Where she once watched her young girl go out to plant in her farm and endure laborious tasks associated with kava farming, the new approach offers a ray of hope for Fiji and regional farmers. Her farm today is a nursery about a stone’s throw from her home in Lovoni Village, Ovalau.

Ms Naucukidi and other farmers with nurseries are choosing the same path they position themselves as critical players in the kava value chain. After a spate of natural disasters, affected kava farmers were left struggling to restore their farms because of the shortage of planting materials.

Since setting up her nursery in late 2017, Ms Naucukidi has sold more than 300 seedlings at $10 each to farmers from as far as Suva. She is now looking to expand her nursery.

The nursery-raised kava plants offer many advantages: they are more resilient, less expensive to maintain and offer a better yield. Eventually, these advantages will translate to better quality kava that will attract better prices.

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Samantha Rina is the communications officer for the PHAMA Project.