



KAVA CULTURE

Words **Jake Lemkowitz**

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Kava, a mildly psychedelic ceremonial drink derived from the root of a pepper plant, has been vital to the *fa'a Samoa* for centuries. It also tastes like mud and toothpaste. I know this because my friend Zach came back from the South Pacific with a kilo in a paper bag. I wanted to see what it was all about, so I went to meet him in East Hampton to share in the experience. The sun had just started setting when we posted up by the pool.

Besides the kava, Zach also brought back some traditional kava hardware: a carved wooden bowl known as a *tanoa*, coconut cups, and a printed silk bandana. Zach scooped out a heaping coconut cup of ground kava from the paper bag, wrapped the kava in the silk, and placed it in the *tanoa* to brew. The water in the bowl became the color of chocolate milk.

This magical brown beverage links the histories of Oceanic civilizations separated by thousands of miles. In modern Samoa, kava is also called 'ava, and is alternately treated as casually as Budweiser and revered as a sacred drink. Important social gatherings and political events usually get things started with a traditional 'ava ceremony. It is an elegant and complex ritual that varies from place to place, but generally includes babes, head-dresses, drums, singing, and carefully choreographed movements. Guests sit on coconut mats while the drink is prepared by *taupou*, the young ladies

who have been chosen to be the village maidens based on their good looks and social standing. The *taupou* chew the root to soften it, allowing it to be brewed. Sometimes the kava is grated, pounded, or ground by old men or young children rather than the *taupou*. But always, the drinks are doled out to guests in order of their status in the community.

That's all good if you're some kind of chief or dignitary, but if you're just knocking back some kava with your friends, it's called "grog swiping." You don't even need a carved wooden bowl; a plastic bucket will do just fine as a *tanoa*. The only real rule is that you drink with somebody else, as the social aspect is all-important to kava drinking.

"I fill the cup and hand it to you," Zach explained, "then I say *vinaka*. You say *bula*, which means cheers, and gulp it down." He'd picked up this kava-drinking terminology in Fiji.



After a few coconut cups, my lips and tongue started to tingle and get numb. And after a few *tanoa* had been drained, I felt a definite buzz of energy. The weird thing is that kava's effects are not totally agreed upon. In Samoa, some guys will use kava to fuel 12-hour talk sessions. Others will use it to calm down, or as an alternative to alcohol, or as nothing more than a digestive. Whatever it does, I was having a great time until Zach's friends who work in finance showed up, and they had no interest in our bowl of brown water. The next thing I knew, I was on my way to some lame beach bar in Montauk packed with other finance people and Lizzie Grubman B-listers.

I drank kava the whole ride over and got extremely mellow. But once we arrived at our destination, I started having one of those existential bum-

mer moments that come from not being drunk at a bar. I thought, Here I am ocean-side in Montauk, a beautiful place that used to belong to the Mauntakket tribe but is now full of assholes. And one day, 'ava too is going to be taken away from the *fa'a Samoa*. A quick search on the Internet reveals a ton of holistic websites peddling kava extracts, pills, and teas that have nothing to do with the drink's origins or cultural traditions. But then again I realized, nothing that tastes like mud is ever going to become too popular, except in LA.

Back at the bar, I breathed a sigh of relief, ordered a nine-dollar beer, sat back and watched a paunchy old golfer grinding on a blonde half his age. It turned out that she was his daughter. *Bula*.