

Historical and Scientific use of *Piper methysticum*

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Piper methysticum aka: Kava Kava is one of my all time favorite herbs, and I use it in several of my herbal formulas for anxiety, pain, stress, sleep, and pleasure. Kava is native to the South Pacific, specifically the Island of Vanuatu. It's been used for centuries by Pacific Islanders as a social, medicinal, and ceremonial drink since the beginning of recorded history. Kava has been and still is used for nervousness, anxiety, stress, sleep disorders, pain, restlessness, and to elevate mood. Traditionally, "the roots were chewed by young females who spit the juice into the kava bowl without swallowing it themselves. Then the juice is mixed with water or coconut milk and further processed." (Natural Standards Database 2014) *

I recall the 1st time I tried kava. I was in an herb class where we were using our all of our senses to experience several mystery plant parts. After thoroughly inspecting the tiny, little, hard piece of what I suspected to be bark or root, I inserted it into my mouth and began to chew, silently, with eyes closed. It tasted very earthy, growing bitter with each chew, and quickly made my tongue go numb! At first, I wondered if I was having some kind of allergic reaction, but I reassured myself and sat with it until it was time to share.

I was pleasantly surprised to find out this little morsel was a piece of kava kava root, and that numbing effect I experienced was due to a whole class of psychoactive compounds known

* I know...pretty gross. Luckily for us, here in the US, we can purchase kava extracts, or make our own, without having to swap spit with friends. Here is a great link on how to make your own kava water extract: <http://www.konakavafarm.com/articles/how-to-make-kava-drink.html>]

kavalactones; the medicinal constituents responsible for calming, anti-anxiety, and even at times, euphoric effects.

Modern day science confirms “through several well-conducted human trials and meta-analysis that kava can effectively treat anxiety, with effects observed after as few as 1-2 doses, and progressive improvements over 1-4 weeks. Preliminary evidence suggests that kava's effectiveness may be equivalent to benzodiazepines.” (Natural Standards Database 2014)

You may have read about kava's potential hepatotoxic impact on the liver. However, when used at recommended doses, under 300 mg a day, and for less than 2 months consecutively, kava is quite safe and effective at providing stress relief, without slowing mental aptitude and without causing addiction. Kava also contains the anti-oxidant glutathione. “Whitton et al. found that aqueous extracts contain glutathione, which has the potential to react with the kavalactones to provide protection against hepatotoxicity, especially when detoxification pathways are saturated” (Natural Standards Database 2014)

“An unpublished analysis of the *in vitro*, *in vivo*, and clinical data shows that kava and its kavalactones are not predictable hepatotoxins.” (Natural Standards Database 2014) Looking back into history, the Pacific Islanders used the aqueous extraction of kava for centuries, without any hepatotoxic side effects.

Kava bars are growing in popularity all over the US. I have enjoyed many a night at the Asheville, NC Kava bar (a non-alcoholic, herbal experience), and visited one in Hollywood, FL. I'd recommend doing a local search to see if there is one near you! Truly an experience worth having!

RESOURCES:

1. Kona Kava Farm (n.d.) How to Make Kava Drink. Retrieved from <http://www.konakavafarm.com/articles/how-to-make-kava-drink.html>
2. Natural Standard Database. (2014) Kava Natural Standard Professional Monograph, Retrieved from <https://naturalmedicines.therapeuticresearch.com/databases/food,-herbs-supplements/k/kava/professional.aspx>
3. Weiss, R. & Fintelmann, V. (2000). Herbal Medicine. (2nd ed.). Stuttgart: Thieme.
4. Wichtl, M. (Ed.). (2004). Herbal Drugs and Phytopharmaceuticals: A Handbook for the Practice on a Scientific Basis. (3rd ed.). Boca Raton: CRC Press.