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MAIN USES FOR KAVA
ARE MEDICINAL,
RELIGIOUS,
POLITICAL, CULTURAL
AND SOCIAL



When passersby stop – intrigued, perhaps, by the blackboard advertising “Kava Happy Hour” – and enter **Kava Lounge SF** (kavaloungesf.com), many don't know what to expect. To these newcomers, owner Alva Caple explains the house drink simply.

“Kava is known to be a muscle relaxant,” he says, “a cure for anxiety, a social stimulant and an aphrodisiac, but it doesn't affect mental clarity. It's like a massage in a shell.”

That's true, but there are surprises. For one, drinking kava will cause your lips and tongue to go numb, albeit temporarily. For another, the non-alcoholic brew looks – and tastes – very earthy. That's explained by the fact that it comes from the root of *Piper methysticum*, a Pacific Island-grown pepper. Kava is made by grinding the root, mixing it with water and filtering the mixture to render tea. Though the beverage is relatively new to California, people in Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu have been drinking the elixir for thousands of years.

Alva first tried kava five years ago in Florida, where the first kava bar on American soil opened in 2002. “Mystic Waters Kava Lounge,” he recalls. “I felt at home and thought that it was cool. You have your mental clarity, but not your inhibitions.” Immediately, he knew he had to share kava with the masses.

Rami Kayali and Nico Rivard, owners of **MeloMelo Kava Bar** (melomelokavabar.com), a kava bar across San Francisco Bay in Berkeley, stumbled upon the drink in West Palm Beach. “People in Florida can have a chip on their shoulder,” explains Rami. “In the kava bar, it was different. It felt like a community; everyone knew everyone. We loved it.” Rami and Nico decided to bring that idea to California.

Last February, the friends opened MeloMelo. Their menu includes The Purist – kava and water, like the Pacific islanders drink it – alongside fanciful kava concoctions that incorporate tropical ingredients like coconut milk, cinnamon, pineapple and ginger. Customers have been effusive. “People have told us [this] changed their lives, because they can't drink, and this is a place they can hang out. And kava lends itself to community. We've seen strangers become friends; we've had birthday parties; even a proposal!”

Kava Lounge has become popular not just for its Pacific potions, but also for staging music and art shows. “Some nights, I'll see a row of cabs dropping people off outside,” says the “kavista”, Moonflower. “We've become a destination.” Given the drink's popularity, are we on the cusp of something bigger?

Rami believes so. “Every day, we hear of people that want to open a kava bar,” he says. In recent years, kava joints have opened in New York City, New Orleans and Austin. “I think we're approaching a tipping point,” he adds. “Kava is gonna explode.” – **Megan McCre**



📍 San Francisco

Can kava cure anxiety?

A Pacific island beverage with surprising side effects, kava took thousands of years to make its way west – but it's gradually becoming the brew *du jour* of innovative bartenders and curious tipplers in San Francisco