

## Paradox Views of Kava

by Ed Johnston, January 2022

Most kava drinkers will recognize the “Dietary Supplement” statement on a package of kava. However, over the last 3 years dried kava and fresh frozen in some countries has undergone a major change thanks to the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) to “protect the health of consumers”. CAC develops food standards based on evidence furnished by the scientific committees of the United Nations, Food and Agricultural Organization (UN FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO). The Kava Standards place kava in the food category as “a beverage when mixed with water”. The Standards include a list of all the Hawaiian cultivars of kava (‘awa) and selections from Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. The *Codex Alimentarius* is a collection of international food standards, codes of practice, guidelines, and recommendations developed by the CAC to protect the consumers' health and ensure fair practices in the food trade.

**A little history: science and culture.** Part of the significance of the Kava Standards is its blending and acceptance of indigenous knowledge and modern science. The Pacific Islanders who selected, preserved and maintained kava for centuries had a voice in creating the Kava Standards. So did WHO, UN FAO and Universities and research organizations worldwide. In fact, the CAC was established by the UN FAO and WHO and today it has more than 180 member countries and more than 200 intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations as observers. **The Codex Alimentarius has become the global reference point for consumers, food producers, national food control agencies, and the international food trade (1).**

**Enter the US FDA.** The Food and Drug Administration also provided guidance for the Kava Standards and raised “safety concerns” early on suggesting more time and studies needed to be sure kava is safe. FDA did not block and indeed “supported” the Kava Standards. However, after the publication of the Kava Standards, FDA’s Dr. Douglas Balentine commented “While Codex establishes international standards, regional or country or regional level regulations still apply. In the United States, Kava products are regulated as dietary supplements and all Kava products must be labeled in accordance with the labeling requirements for dietary supplements” adding later, changes in the FDA can take a long time. Put simply this means the US will not change its view of kava despite the US having a USDA Codex office with an exemplary staff of 10 in Washington DC.

**“A long time”?** The FDA wants more time, more studies. A Pacific Islander would say kava has been a safe integral part of their culture for thousands of years. The Journal of the American Medical Association has already editorialized an open appeal to the FDA (2010) that historic use shows that kava is safe in Pacific Island cultures and traditional kava beverage is consumed daily without apparent adverse effects and cultivars considered as noble have a long history of safe use. Add to the mix the Codex alimentarius, the WHO and the UN FAO and we wonder why the FDA is so steadfast in its position.

1. Exert from Stankovic, in Encyclopedia of Food and Health, 2016. *Science Direct*