

St. Petersburg's new Sawgrass bar puts the tea in tiki

By Justin Grant, Times correspondent
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Luis Santana/tbt*

Purple neon with bamboo, surfboards and little thatched-roof booths can only mean unique drinks and exotic teas.

And now for something completely different! I mean that, too. There are a lot of unique and interesting bars in the bay area, but Sawgrass Tiki Bar and Tea House is in its own category. It may not be everyone's cup of tea — I'll keep a one-pun limit this week — but it's unquestionably a one-of-a-kind spot.

Some of you may remember Sawgrass from its old home on the Tarpon Springs Sponge Docks. It was the heavily-neoned spot just off the main thoroughfare, proudly advertising its 100-ounce margarita. This gargantuan cocktail was made of wine-based faux liquors and garnished with colorful cherries, oranges and starfruit.

When the rent went up, owners Susan Bridges and Charlie Mackert moved to downtown St. Petersburg, in a Grand Central space across the street from Taco Bus. The bar still boasts the same fun, wine-based tiki drinks of the old spot (as well as a scaled-down, 50-ounce version of the aforementioned margarita, which makes it much easier for two people to share), but the selection has broadened significantly to include a wide range of exotic and unusual teas, including a few that produce results more appropriate for a lounge than a typical tea house.

I'm referring to kava and kratom, two of the more unusual offerings at Sawgrass. Kava is not a new addition to the St. Pete scene, with Bula Kafe and Mad Hatters Ethnobotanical Tea Bar serving teas made from the root of the Polynesian kava plant for some time now. Kratom is a little more unusual, as well as controversial.

Kava, if you've never had it, looks a bit like muddy water (and tastes similar, too!) and is served in half of a coconut shell. It produces calming, relaxing effects but is not good to mix with alcohol, so if you visit Sawgrass, you'll want to make the decision beforehand, not halfway through. Bridges and Mackert first experienced kava during a trip to Hawaii and learned to make it at home, eventually adding it as an option at their bar.

Kratom is a plant from Thailand that also produces relaxing effects. In small doses it acts as a mild stimulant (like coffee or tea), but in larger doses, it has a strong sedative effect, acting on the drinker's opiate receptors. Needless to say, there is a bit of controversy about the safety of kratom, and it's even illegal in its home country of Thailand. I can't imagine that it's significantly riskier than the consumption of alcohol, but caveat emptor nonetheless.

Kava and kratom can be served plain, with fruit garnishes, or even in smoothies (to mask the taste). Sawgrass also offers a full line of more traditional teas, ranging from the fruity rooibos teas to the earthy, pungent pu-erh teas. Tea lovers will find some seriously tasty stuff in the lineup.

Of course, this is still Sawgrass Tiki Bar (as evidenced by an abundance of purple neon juxtaposed with bamboo, surfboards and little thatched-roof booths), so you can expect some interesting alcohol-based drinks. Some include tea as well, like the Missionary's Downfall (made with wine-based "rum," fruit juices and mint tea). There's also a variety of sake, and draft kombucha is on its way soon. And that 50-ounce margarita, made with blue agave wine, is only \$12.50.

From the unique sake- and wine-based cocktails, to kratom, kava and hookah (forgot to mention that last part), to the funky neon/tropical vibe that all this stuff is served in, Sawgrass Tiki Bar and Tea House is a real change of pace from, well, everything. It's a chilled-out, friendly spot for locals looking to relax and socialize.

If you want a beer or fruity cocktail (albeit a wine-based one), no problem. If you're not a drinker, you'll enjoy the wide tea selection. If you want to skip the booze but don't mind a little buzz, consider the kava or kratom. As with any intoxicating substance (like, say, alcohol), make sure not to overdo it and you'll no doubt enjoy your trip to this odd but very cool tiki lounge.

— jg@saintbeat.com

Sawgrass Tiki Bar and Tea House

2315 Central Ave., St. Petersburg. (727) 322-6000, facebook.com/sawgrasstikibar

The vibe: A Pacific Island-themed bar specializing in unique tiki-style drinks and various exotic teas.

Food: Snacks and entrees, \$1.50-\$9.95.

Booze: Beer, \$2.50-\$7.50; wine, \$5.50-\$15.

Specialty: Sawgrass has a nice variety of beers both on draft and in bottles (including several local brews), but don't forget to try the cocktails. Yes, they're made with wine-based faux liquor (or sake in some cases), but they hit the spot if you're in the mood for something tropical. The standards are there — rumrunner, piña colada, strawberry daiquiri — but check out the tiki drinks, which utilize some unusual ingredients, like port and cherry wine. I tried the Missionary's Downfall, which balances wine-based "rum" with pineapple, peach, lime and mint tea, garnished with a meaty pineapple slice and fresh mint. I ordered mine without honey, and it had just the right balance of sweet, herbal and tart.

Hours: 4 p.m. to midnight Monday-Wednesday, 4 p.m. to 3 a.m. Thursday-Saturday, 1 p.m. to midnight Sunday.

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