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Food & Culture in New Zealand



MAORI TRADITIONAL FOODS

— Nga Tino Kai a te Maori

Every culture has its traditions. The New Zealand Nutrition Taskforce recognised that Maori, Pakeha, Pacific Island and other ethnic groups living in New Zealand eat special foods. Differences in traditional foods result from living in vastly different physical and cultural environments.

For all ethnic groups in New Zealand food availability and food choices have changed significantly over the years. This is not so for the Maori people (tangata whenua), who retain traditional foods which have a spiritual significance.

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Maori have retained these traditional foods in spite of contact with Europeans. The kumara was carried to New Zealand by the first canoes to visit these shores. Taro was brought by early Maori migrants from their Pacific homes. As well as the foods themselves, Maori have special traditions concerning planting, harvesting and preparation of foods. As a people they understood the land, the forests, the sea and the foods available to them. The area where food was to be gathered was respected. Maori were conservationists, never taking more than was needed.

Early Maori settlers established villages along the coast, at streams and at river mouths. This gave them good access to the resources of land and sea and somewhere safe to pull up their canoes. They travelled throughout New Zealand and food, for example kumara, which didn't grow in the colder southern areas, was an item of trade.

Early Maori depended on what the sea, rivers, land and forest supplied:

- ika moana — sea fish, for example patiki (flounder), koura (crayfish)
- ika wai whenua — freshwater fish, for example tuna (eels), inanga (whitebait)
- pipi moana — seawater shellfish, for example paua, pipi, kuku (mussels)
- pipi wai whenua — freshwater shellfish, for example koura (freshwater crayfish)
- manu — birds
- kiori — rat.

Foods used included:

- roots — aruhe (fern root), raupo (bulrush)
- young shoots — piko piko/mauku (fern fronds)
- leaves — poniu (wild cress), puha (sour thistle)
- berries — karaka, hinau, tawa, matai, titoki
- pollen — raupo (bulrush)
- heart of the leaf — nikau (New Zealand palm), ti kouka (cabbage tree)
- seaweed — karengo, rimurimu.

Comments on Maori food by early European visitors*

Food Patterns

Early European visitors to these shores recorded Maori food patterns. In December 1769, Monneron, an officer with the French Expedition of Jean de Surville at Doubtless Bay in the north of New Zealand, recorded:

The main diet of the Maori was fern root, which grew in great quantity. It was prepared by being warmed by a fire, beaten, then used as bread.

They also ate quantities of fish. To do this a hole was dug in the ground, half-filled with stones, and a fire lit on top. When the stones were heated, the fish, well-enveloped in leaves, was laid on them. Soil was then used to cover the oven until the food was cooked.¹

Fern Root

In the above short extract Monneron explains the importance and use of fern root for the Maori people. He also gives a description of a hangi, or earth oven.

In 1807, a European doctor, John Savage, visited the Bay of Islands. He too commented on the use of fern root:

The fern grows here in abundance, the root of which is held in great estimation by the Maori. Before the introduction of potatoes it was almost their only edible vegetable. They call it rauaruhe.²

During his visit to New Zealand in 1814 John Nicholas made many observations of life in this country. He writes that “once heated, the fern root was beaten with a stone or wooden mallet until soft and ready for chewing”. It was chewed until all the sweet, glutinous substance was extracted, then the fibrous material was spat out. “This,” wrote Nicholas, “satisfied the appetite.” Nicholas recorded:

Further along the beach [Rangihoua Bay, in the Bay of Islands] we came to some people sitting on the sand in small groups. Cooks were roasting and beating fern root, which when ready was thrown to those seated. On seeing us they called out, ‘Haere mai, haere mai,’ and invited us to join them. Some fern root was thrown to us. They considered me their guest.³

A Maori Meal: Using a Hangi

In January 1815, the young Bay of Islands chief Ruatara took Samuel Marsden and his friend John Nicholas up the Kerikeri Inlet — ‘three hours of very hard paddling by canoe.’ Nicholas records a meal prepared by the great Ngapuhi chief Hongi Hika and his people:

To light a fire Hongi took some dry grass and a piece of rotten wood. He turned a small stick rapidly between the palms of his hands until the friction where the stick met the grass caused it to burn. Then he carefully folded the grass, shaking it backwards and forwards until it burst into flames. Meanwhile the cooks had prepared a hangi or ground oven. Others peeled potatoes using a mussel shell.⁴

* Most of these are based on northern New Zealand, an early area of indepth contact between Maori and European. Can you find writings from your own area?

Nicholas described the preparation of an earth oven, or hangi. A circular hole was dug in the ground, stones placed in the bottom and a fire lit on them. Another covering of stones was arranged on top. Once heated, the embers were cleared away and some stones set aside. Wet grass was laid on the hot stones, then the scraped potatoes, and more wet grass and hot stones. The hole was then covered with soil. The steam from the wet grass caused the potatoes to be cooked in about 10 minutes, ready for eating.

Although the sweet potato (kumara) had been brought to New Zealand in the first Maori canoes, the potato was introduced by early European contacts. From 1793 Lieutenant Philip King, Superintendent of the Convict Colony at Norfolk Island, sent regular supplies of breeding pigs, potatoes and vegetable seeds to the Maori people of the north. It was not long before these foods became part of the diet of the Maori, as well as a source for trade with visiting European vessels.

In January 1815, when Marsden and Nicholas were taken by the powerful chief Hongi Hika to his great pa near the area known today as Waimate North, they continued on to Lake Omapere which lies between Okaihau and Kaikohe. Nicholas was interested to see taro growing (taro plants had been brought in canoes from the Pacific): "It was growing, planted out in rows with the soil carefully dug up and pressed around the roots." It is still possible today to come across clumps of taro growing beside streams in the north.

During this visit to Hongi Hika, Marsden and Nicholas were offered wild duck, fish and pork with potatoes, all prepared in the hangi. On return to Hongi's village from Lake Omapere they found a meal ready for them:

*Hongi had had two pigs killed for his visitors and soon after their return a steaming hot meal was set before them. Nicholas offered his knife to the cooks, but they refused his offer, preferring to use their own mussel shells with which they very quickly divided the meat into portions. He commented, 'We had an excellent dinner ... the flavour given by this method of cooking is exquisite. The juices seem much better preserved in the meat.'*⁵

Eating Areas

On present day marae, eating and sleeping areas are always kept separate. This was the traditional pattern in a Maori village. In 1807, John Savage described the homes of Maori living at Te Puna, a quiet bay on the north side of the Bay of Islands. The houses were about one and a half metres high, made of rushes with the top thatched with strong bladed grass or flax.

*Food was not prepared in the living hut, but in a separate shed, formed by four posts in the ground covered with rushes.*⁶

Preparation and Storage of Food

Ruatara mentioned a separate hut in which he stored potatoes and kumara. As well as separate storage huts, food was prepared and stored on platforms for the winter or in pataka, wooden store houses. Food platforms were described at Paroa Bay, in the Bay of Islands:

THE HANGI

Traditional Cooking in an Earth Oven

The hangi was the traditional means of food preparation for the Maori. The method used is similar to that of a pressure cooker as the food is cooked by steam trapped under the ground.

A hangi is an effective way of preparing and cooking food for large or small groups of people. It has the added advantage that most of the work is finished two and a half to three hours before the meal is to be served. Apart from someone checking occasionally that steam is not escaping, the workers are free to attend the celebration, or to attend to other food or table preparations.

The size of the hangi depends on numbers catered for. This will determine how much food is required, how many baskets are needed; the size of the hole and the number of stones necessary for the hangi. Traditionally, the meat was placed directly onto hot stones, with the vegetables on top. Now, metal baskets are often used for ease of handling and serving — and they are reusable.



◀ 1 Stones placed in the hangi hole.



▼ 2 Food baskets placed in the hangi.



▼ 3 Baskets covered with wet white cloth, then wet sacks.



4 Sacks covered with earth to prevent steam escaping. ▶

Food

The meat could include pork, mutton, chicken and fish. Potato, kumara and pumpkin are popular vegetables. If cabbage is used, the cabbages may be cooked whole, then cut up when served.

There are two methods used to prepare a hangi:

Method 1

- Dig a pit 60 cm deep by 60 cm wide — or large enough for the number of wire baskets required.
- Build a fire in the hole, placing the kindling (smaller wood) first, then the heavier wood to form a platform for the stones.
- Pile the stones on top, then set the wood alight. Manuka is a good wood — the fire must be very hot to heat the stones. Certain types of river stones or volcanic rocks are used as they hold their heat.
- When the fire burns down, the stones will be very hot and will have fallen to the bottom of the hole. All burning wood, embers and ashes are removed. Work quickly to prevent loss of heat. The food is then placed on the rocks.

Method 2

In this method the hole is dug and a smaller fire set in the hole to warm and dry the pit. A second fire is set and lit beside the hangi hole, to heat the stones. This makes it easier to remove the wood and ash, before placing the hot stones into the hole then the food on top.

Placing the Food/Covering the Hangi

- The jointed meat, chicken and/or fish, along with the vegetables cut into serving portions are arranged in the wire baskets — meats at the bottom, vegetables on top.
- Alternatively the meat and the vegetables can be wrapped in foil, in individual servings, then arranged in the wire baskets. This makes serving easier.
- Salt and water are added.
- Working quickly the wire baskets are placed onto the hot stones.
- The food is covered by white cloths soaked in cold water.
- The contents of the hangi are then soaked with water. The amount varies according to the heat of the rocks, the size of the hangi and the amount of food to be cooked. It can range from two to 20 litres!
- Finally wet sacks and a covering of soil is spread on top to seal all air vents.
- The hangi is left for about three hours, during which time the steam will cook the food.
- When opening the hangi remove all soil carefully. Fold the sacks back over the edges of the pit to provide a clean area to work on. Remove cloths, then lift the baskets out of the hangi pit.
- The food is taken to the tables where the meat can be carved and served with the vegetables, or the individual foil-wrapped packages given out.