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MANAAKITAKA REKA:
A COLLABORATIVE KAI EXPERIENCE
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Chloe Humphreys

INTRODUCTION

Context for the project: Feast Matariki, A national celebration of indigenous food stories

Established in 2019, *Feast Matariki* is Aotearoa New Zealand's first and only national food celebration dedicated to honouring indigenous food narratives during the Māori New Year. The festival comprises a series of kai activations and events across the motu, fostering connections and enhancing cultural capability among those who contribute to Aotearoa New Zealand's food landscape. These events help deepen understanding of Matariki, food sovereignty, indigenous knowledge, and the role of kai in wellbeing and community resilience.

Funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment (MBIE) and overseen by EatNZ, the 2024 *Feast Matariki* celebrations were shaped by the concept of kai hau kai—a Māori practice of reciprocal exchange of resources, narratives, and practices (Payne, 2020). A series of curated events were held in Ōtautahi/Christchurch, Ōtepoti/Dunedin, and Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, with the support of Ngāi Tahu and various community partners.

As part of *Feast Matariki* celebrations in Ōtepoti, a team of kaiako and ākonga from Otago Polytechnic, led by Adrian Woodhouse (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha), Chloe Humphreys, and Tim Lynch, developed the food experience concept *Manaakitaka Reka (Delicious Hospitality)*. This public food experience explored Aotearoa's past, present, and future food systems. Guided by the kaupapa: "imagine a food system that doesn't rely on inequity of access," this project considered how indigenous thinking could contribute to a more just and sustainable food system for all. Building on the foundations established in previous Matariki celebrations, the team collaborated with mana whenua to design a kai experience for approximately 80 guests that wove together indigenous food knowledge, contemporary sustainability practices, and culturally responsive design thinking. The event took place at Otago Polytechnic on 26 June 2024, offering an interactive and immersive exploration of kai as a vehicle for cultural storytelling and social change. This review documents the evolution of the project and tells the story of the final kai experience.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN METHODOLOGY

A collaborative design methodology was adopted for the project, enabling a cross-disciplinary approach that brought together students from the Bachelor of Culinary Arts, Bachelor of Design (Product), and Bachelor of Design (Communication) programmes. Their task extended beyond menu development to encompass all aspects of the experience, from food and service design to communication and storytelling. While some ākonga sat naturally within their own area of expertise, the project offered others an opportunity to step outside of their discipline and explore areas of design that were new to them. The integration of cultural knowledge, creative practice, experience design, and menu design, provided ākonga with an immersive, practice-based approach to food design, underpinned by te ao Māori and sustainability principles.

Practice theory, a sociological framework that explores the interplay between materials, competencies, and meanings, was introduced during the development phase of the project (Shove, 2010). Ākonga were encouraged to consider design decisions in a deeply integrated and connected manner by exploring materials (ingredients, tools, experience design materials, and natural resources); developing competencies (culinary techniques and practices, storytelling, and sustainability practices), and engaging with the meanings behind them (manaakitaka, indigenous food sovereignty, and te ao Māori). By analysing and bringing together all three areas, the design team aimed to produce an experience that not only engaged the senses but also carried cultural, social, and ecological significance (Lynch, 2024).

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT: MAHIKA KAI



Figure 1. Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau (Sinclair Wetlands).
Photograph: Chloe Humphreys.

Integrating indigenous thinking around food systems led the design team to explore mahika kai, starting with a field trip to Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau (Sinclair Wetlands). Tumai Cassidy (Kāi Te Pahi, Kāi Te Ruahikihiki, Kāto Moki, Kāi Tahu), and Steve Bryant (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha) led the team on a hikoi (walk) around this wahi taonga (treasured place), sharing stories of the site's history and insights into how we must better protect our indigenous food systems.

One of the key insights shared by Cassidy and Bryant was the inherent tension between sustainability and generosity. They emphasised the profound spiritual relationship that Māori maintain with the whenua (land) and all living beings, underscoring the necessity of engaging with these entities with the utmost respect. Prior to colonisation, Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau served as a significant food-gathering site for Kāi Tahu



Figure 2. Te Nohoaka o Tukiauau (Sinclair Wetlands).
Photograph: Chloe Humphreys.

and Kāti Mamoe. However, the introduction of invasive species, alongside the ecological degradation caused by Western agricultural practices, severely impacted the availability and sustainability of kai Māori (traditional Māori food sources). The ongoing restoration efforts led by Kāi Tahu seek to re-establish ecological equilibrium and facilitate the resurgence of indigenous food systems. As a result, sustainability and the protection of kai Māori emerged as fundamental considerations in the conceptualisation and execution of this project.

Another central principle guiding the project was manaakitaka, which encompasses the values of hospitality, care, and generosity. Within te ao Māori, mana is closely linked to values of giving and abundance (Dell et al., 2018). This meant that, for the project, generosity was a crucial aspect of giving back to mana whenua. However, ākonga quickly understood that this generosity had to be carefully balanced with sustainability, particularly in relation to the inclusion of indigenous food sources.

Achieving this balance needed a highly intentional approach to menu design and ingredient selection. Ākonga and kaiako worked collaboratively to design a menu that featured a curated “taste” of local kai Māori, complemented by a broader celebration of producers committed to regenerative practices. Additionally, the integration of rescued food and ingredients traditionally considered second-tier reinforced the project’s commitment to minimising food waste while honouring both environmental and cultural sustainability.

MANAAKITAKA REKA: THE KAI EXPERIENCE

The design of the final experience aimed to narrate the history of Aotearoa’s food systems—past, present, and future—while exploring how a deeper understanding of these systems can foster more sustainable and reciprocal ways of eating. The intention was to foster mindfulness about what we eat and the food systems that sustain us while ensuring the experience embodied manaakitaka through exceptional kai and hospitality.

The event was structured around three distinct experiential narratives, each exploring a different food system over time. The first experience (experience tahi), set outdoors, showcased indigenous food systems, offering guests a taste of kai Māori prepared with ingredients and techniques deeply rooted in traditional practices. Local kai moana (seafood), including tuaki (clams), kuku (green-lipped mussels), and rawaru (cod) wings, were steamed and roasted in rimurapa (bull kelp) over an open fire. Kūmara was hot smoked over mānuka and served with pickled karengo (native seaweed), while tasters of tītī (muttonbird) were paired with warm kawakawa and horopito tea. Grounded in the kai traditions of Te Waipounamu, these dishes provided a small taste of the past while prioritising sustainability in their selection, gathering, and preparation. The sensory experience of eating directly from the fire, huddled together on a cold, dark, foggy night, evoked the essence of Southern Māori kai customs, immersing guests in the rich cultural traditions embedded in these food practices.



Figure 3. Experience Tahi.
Photograph: Jodie Gibson.



Figure 4. Experience Tahi.
Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

Just as the guests began to feel the cold, the double doors of Manaaki Restaurant opened, revealing a warm, candlelit space set with white plates and formal table settings. This phase of the evening represented the era of colonisation, inviting scrutiny of the new food systems and paradigms that have since dominated Aotearoa's culinary landscape. Ākonga had designed the menu to reflect this colonial influence. An amuse-bouche titled *A Taste of Swede Served in a Noxious Weed* featured swede—an introduced species—prepared using various Western techniques and served in bamboo, another introduced species known for its invasive growth and tendency to smother native flora. The main course showcased lamb ribs braised in milk (a nod to the dairy industry) and lamb belly slow-baked in clay, symbolising the whenua on which the animal grazed.

This phase of the experience served a dual purpose. By highlighting introduced species and Western preparation techniques, the dishes provided a stark contrast to kai Māori, emphasising the profound changes wrought by colonisation. At the same time, sustainability remained central, with a focus on hyperlocal seasonal ingredients and secondary cuts of meat sourced from Provenance Lamb, a bio-farm committed to regenerative practices. Another layer of storytelling was woven into the presentation, with the whakapapa (genealogy) of the kai at the heart of the dishes. The lamb belly was presented in the clay in which it was baked, while the tables were strewn with autumn leaves, branches, and rocks, evoking the natural environment from which these ingredients were sourced.

The final experience (experience toru) presented an alternative food system: one that critically examined society's immense food waste problem and showcased a solution that rescued and revalued food destined for landfill. Hazelnut pulp, a byproduct of oil extraction at Dunford Grove, was repurposed into mini hazelnut cakes, served with compressed windfall apples collected from Darling's Orchard in Roxburgh. By reimagining ingredients typically considered waste, this phase of the event aimed to challenge perceptions of



Figure 5. Experience Toru.
Photograph: Jodie Gibson.

food waste and highlight the unsustainable nature of current food systems. In doing so, it encouraged guests to consider more equitable and sustainable approaches to food production and consumption.

Reciprocity lay at the heart of the entire experience, ensuring that every design decision aligned with principles of sustainability and respect for the environment. A strict low-waste policy was upheld, with all waste—whether from food, props, or table settings—returned to its original environment or integrated into a closed-loop system, where it was transformed into compost to nourish the living campus gardens. As a final act of giving back, each guest was gifted a pod of kōwhai seeds, inviting them to contribute to the regeneration of indigenous plant life, reinforcing the interconnected relationship between people, food, and the whenua.

Overall, *Manaakitaka Reka* created space for ākonga, kaiako, and guests to reflect on our current food systems and explore indigenous practices as alternative models for a more equitable future. Through collaborative design and the deep and deliberate consideration of manaakitaka, sustainability, and reciprocity, the project encouraged participants to question assumptions and consider the potential of kai as a means for fostering social and systemic awareness in Aotearoa and beyond. These reflections offer valuable starting points for future *Feast Matariki* events and similar initiatives aiming to centre indigenous knowledge and equitable access to kai.

You can find a link to a video overview of the event here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOI371S-4xw>

AI statement

I used ChatGPT to aid with grammar and sentence structure and to proofread my work.

Chloe Humphreys is the Academic Leader and Principal Lecturer on the Bachelor of Culinary Arts programme at the Food Design Institute, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand. Chloe's research is focused on the subject area of culinary education and wellbeing, and how through mindful curriculum interventions, education can be a site of personal empowerment.

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