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MANA AND THE PASS: MĀORI PERSPECTIVES ON WELL-BEING IN KITCHEN CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

This reflective article delves into the critical learning moments of my professional culinary journey, particularly my early years in the hospitality industry when I played a junior role, learning and following directives from others. It's a story which contemplates culinary industry culture: the club that you just don't understand if you haven't been a member. My account dredges up unquestioned behaviours and questionable values within the industry and surfaces a sad realisation that I had somehow missed the most important and meaningful values in life while working in an industry I loved. How can it be that I only discovered the meaning of true hospitality—manaakitanga/manaakitaka—when I started moving away from the industry?

THE WORLD OF THE KITCHEN

The professional kitchen has long been recognised as a world unto itself, governed by its own set of rules and rituals. Within this environment, individuals are expected to conform to behavioural norms established by those in leadership positions (Barton, 2017; Burrow et al., 2024; Cooper et al., 2017; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Therefore, adherence to these rules, rituals, and norms fosters a shared understanding among chefs—an unspoken awareness of how things should operate in fine dining establishments, shaped by experience and tradition.

In recent years, hospitality scholars have increasingly embraced reflective storywork. They use autoethnography as a methodology to cultivate an authentic voice that fosters critical discussion and drives change within the field (Lee, 2021, 2025; Lee & Ruck, 2022; Slavnic, 2013; Woodhouse, 2018, 2021). This reflective commentary contributes to these ongoing critical conversations by offering insights and perspectives that further enrich the discourse. It is a personal story about culinary learner and master, which speaks to integrity, respect, fear, values, humiliation, and hierarchy. It addresses how the traditional culinary way of life—the chef's way of thinking—largely endures today, while also discussing how kitchen culture is evolving. The lid was peeled off the industry's can of culture when social media arrived, and exposure and scrutiny of our 'secret' institution began. Shifts in thinking and attitudes have followed.

The thing with chefs is: you have to earn your stripes. From my experience, to do this in a genuine way takes a minimum of 10 to 15 years. When referring to the educational experiences of young chefs earning their stripes, Chef Gordon Ramsay notes that "you have to bow down and stay focused until the knowledge is tucked away … The weak disappear off the face of the earth" (as quoted in Duncan, 2001, p. 10). Hence, the practice of becoming a chef within fine dining kitchens is as much about learning to be obedient to the master as it is about the acquisition of your craft skills.

As a junior chef, I didn't think about kitchen culture. Work practices, actions, and language were unquestioned and accepted as the norm. We aspired to learn as much from our leaders as possible. That was how you earned their respect: by showing them that you wanted to be there, wanted to learn from them, and wanted to work extra hard—harder than your peers. We wanted to be just like our leaders. We were tight. We all followed, together. This was our distorted version of kotahitaka/kotahitanga: the Māori value of collective purpose and teamwork. The system generated respect for hierarchy in the kitchen. This unwavering commitment to our chef masters meant something; it still means something. Outsiders just don't get it. It's just how it is.

Looking at other industries at the time, we would all shake our heads and say, "They've got no idea." I remember my flatmate complaining about working from eight until six, Monday to Friday. When those of us working in hospitality recalled his comments, there'd be disbelief and high-pitched laughter. Ours was a culture of Us versus Them. Our version of the positive relationships and kinships embodied in the Māori value of whanaungataka/whanaungatanga were skewed by this "Us versus Them" conditioning and subsequent alienation. My reaction towards my flatmate's complaints echoes the findings of Palmer, Cooper, and Burns (2010) who explored the cultural "underbelly" of the culinary arts. Palmer and colleagues' (2010) study illuminated how the culinary arts foster a deeply embedded culture of hard work, resilience, and collective responsibility, which in turn shapes a strong sense of kinship and group identity among chefs. This collective identity, reinforced through shared experiences of long hours and hard dirty work, delineates those in the profession from the "other" (non-chefs), thereby strengthening the internal cohesion and distinctiveness of the chef community. As a consequence, the delineation between chefs and outsiders is not merely occupational but deeply cultural, perpetuating an exclusive, self-referential professional community (Palmer et al., 2010).

As working chefs, we were at the coalface, believing we were doing the real shit; the work that mattered. Work that took skill, talent, commitment, and sheer slog. And then there were the customers. Those battle-hardened chefs reading this article will know precisely what I mean by this, but let me explain. Customers, sometimes along with front-of-house staff, were often seen as the enemy and fell into their very own "outsider" category in the culinary wars. In our minds, customers and other staff were just there to make our life hard. They were seen as poorly educated in all things culinary; demanding; lacking initiative, and possessing no capacity to understand the pressure we were under. Therefore, they needed to be taught their place in the order of things. Any acts of kotahitaka/kotahitanga took place solely inside the boundary of the lino seam of the non-slip kitchen floor and not a step over. Unquestionably, this division still exists today.

I hasten to add that this attitude towards "outsiders" varied in different establishments. There were kitchens that were the polar opposite. But here, I am describing the attitudes and the type of camaraderie or kotahitaka/kotahitanga which existed. This was a grinning, lop-sided, and toothless kotahitaka. When you've been socialised and conditioned, you simply don't question. You are one of the group and it feels good to belong.

We were all about learning from actual culinary masters (*not* TikTok reels or this televised so-called MasterChef bullshit, I might add). We were about hierarchy; earning integrity and respect by working extremely hard; having expansive knowledge of the French classics; constantly researching the latest methods and innovations, and deftly applying all known preparation and presentation techniques whilst under the enormous expectations and pressure of nightly service.

This was the other world—the club—in which 'real' chefs existed.

A PROMPT FOR REFLECTION

Now, let us roll the clock forward 25 years. I'm a parent and homeowner and finally doing a degree. The culinary arts degree I'm completing is deeply reflective, and this takes me by surprise. I share this confusion with my lecturer when reading the outline requirements of an upcoming assignment. I'm required to write two reflective articles,

based on examples from my professional experience, each exploring the principles and values of manaakitanga/manaakitaka, kotahitanga/kotahitaka, and whanaungatanga/whanaungataka, within the hospitality sector.

The instructions trigger frustration and dismay. I think, "Huh?! How is this relevant?" I say, "I can't make any connection at all." I'm given some readings, links to research articles, and videos explaining these Māori principles. For reference, here are the values and the definitions we were provided with:

Manaakitaka (manaakitanga):	The act of extending hospitality towards others.
Kotahitaka (kotahitanga):	The development of collective purpose and teamwork.
Whanaungatanga (whanaungatanga):	The formation of positive relationships and kinship.

I struggle to find anything in my memory bank which would authentically represent these values.

I found myself in a hole. I was too worried to ask, "Is it just me, or is it really, really hard to provide these examples?" I realised that I had a career of incidents and experiences which represented nothing but the contrary. Yet, I was encouraged to tell my story and share those experiences. What follows is what I wrote.

MY STORY

I once observed the process of breaking a person so they would conform to the requirements of the workplace. I watched one person using humiliation, physical size, and intense cross-examining to bring someone down a peg or two and assert their dominance. It was a dressing down of a person in front of their workmates so that they became compliant and never made that same mistake again. We were shown how to alienate a young man and make him cry at work. This experience is just one of many which regularly occurred in this kitchen. To protect identities, I have used pseudonyms.

On this particular day, we were ticking over with prep, mostly preoccupied with our own work and being ready in time for service. Brent, the head chef, was a big guy. There's no point in airbrushing it, he was pretty huge and he liked to talk about it. Bending down into the service fridges was clearly not easy for him and so he made very little attempt to squat neatly. He'd just bend right on over, into what remained of any walking space, and then immediately make an offensive joke about his backside. It was a tiny kitchen anyway, and when he was in there, we used our bodies and movements very efficiently indeed. Brent used to walk over to my board and stand right up close, so I had nowhere to go. I used to think to myself, "Well, this is cosy." It was almost comedic. But it was often very uncomfortable. He'd joke, "What's the matter, am I taking up your space? Big boy too fat to fit?" And he'd bellow with laughter. He loved our discomfort.

When Brent came into the kitchen, he never let us know where he was or when to expect him. This kept us at just the right level of anxiety. It was nerve wracking. He never said "legs," or "coming through," when he was on these missions. He just materialised into your space, forcing you to move aside while he went through your service fridge and rattled through your mise (prep) saying things like "This fucking mise better be fucking good. You trying to hide something from me?" Nothing passed him by, until he could satisfy himself that you were doing exactly as you were told.

Who Brent chose to target first always changed. On this day, James, a demi chef, was portioning a tray of citrus semi-freddo into plastic 1L service containers. When he entered James's section, Brent's energy immediately changed. "What are you fucking DOING here?" he shouted. We all knew what was coming but nobody dared exchange a glance. I remember the dread creeping into the space. Brent sucked the air out of the room. He looked at what James was doing, and then he started tearing James down. He drilled him and his words travelled between my own ears and into the back of my head and down into my brainstem. I felt prickling pain and discomfort. I felt hot. Panicked. I could feel my heart banging in my chest from adrenaline. I knew what was coming and each time

it felt worse. There was absolutely nowhere to hide and nothing that could stop it. If anyone tried to slope out of the kitchen, he would notice and say, "Where the fuck are you going? You can fuckin' stay here and learn from this donkey too."

It was relentless. Brent would climb into someone and ride them for an excruciating eternity. And then when we thought it surely must be over, he went further:

> "What did you do that for, you fucking homo?"
>
> "Sorry, Chef."
>
> "I fucking told you to portion it into 50 grams."
>
> "Sorry, Chef."
>
> "Do you think you know better than me?"
>
> "No, Chef."
>
> "Do you think I'm a dumb cunt?"
>
> "No, Chef."
>
> "Get your fucking book out and show me, you fucking donkey."
>
> "Oui, Chef."
>
> "So, what the fuck does that say? Does it fucking say 50 grams in your own fucking writing you dumb cunt, or does it say 'I'll do whatever the fuck I want 'cos I'm an arrogant little prick'?"
>
> "It says 50 grams, Chef."
>
> "Then what the fuck is wrong with you?"
>
> "Nothing, Chef. I'm probably a bit tired."
>
> (Wrong answer).
>
> "You're fucken tired? Didn't you just have two fucking days off, for fuck's sake?"
>
> "Oui, Chef."
>
> "Then what the fuck are you talking about? Can't you fucking handle it? What's wrong with you, you pussy?"
>
> James said, with a tremble in his voice, "Nothing, Chef. Sorry, Chef."
>
> And then Brent said up close: "Fuck off with your fucking 'sorry.'"

Brent would never leave the kitchen after drilling someone. He hung around to really work it through.

This is a true story. I hate repeating Brent's words and language but it's how kitchen language was, and there were times when it was actually worse. I can still feel the atmosphere and the dread. I often think about Brent and try to make sense of his behaviour. We all accepted it. Put simply, it was normal back then. We offered a high-end, fine-dining menu, each course with wine matches, and charged a ridiculous amount per head. We were the restaurant everyone was talking about. Brent was under enormous pressure, and he had to be certain everything was exactly as he wanted it to be.

As a head chef, Brent was highly skilled and well-travelled. At times, he could be extremely funny, intelligent, and reveal a heart made of marshmallow. These traits, along with his other, less likeable aspects, made it all the more excruciating when he was pissed off because I knew deep inside he was kind. I still felt loyalty towards him.

When I talk to other chefs who were cooking at the time, at similar places, they know exactly what it means to break a chef. It was a way of bringing someone down and cracking their psychological shell permanently. You had

to have total buy-in, compliance and commitment from them, and if there was the slightest indication of attitude or mutiny, that was it. They broke chefs to "teach" them. If that chef was still there the next day, well, that was good. If they had left, they were never going to be good enough.

Brent didn't uplift James's mana; he tore it down and embarrassed him. Later, he would make jokes about portioning citrus semi-freddo anytime someone was portioning anything at all, and he had a way of making us—even James—laugh about it. But the laughter was hollow. There was a cloud that hung over us still. Brent was both Jekyll and Hyde.

Was this treatment of people effective? In the respect that Brent achieved what he needed to achieve, sadly, yes, it was. When it came to forming positive relationships and creating an environment where people felt united, that their integrity was upheld and they were respected as learners who made mistakes, then, no. Absolutely not. When this and other such episodes occurred, the atmosphere in the kitchen was taxing and stressful for everyone, including the front of house staff. It was incredibly hard to concentrate or focus on anything, and you found yourself working inefficiently. It had a negative impact on our productivity. After this experience, I just wanted James to leave and take the bad juju with him. Yes, he could be cocky sometimes, but he was barely twenty.

My own response to such treatment in this kitchen was self-preservation. Rather than being in a situation where I felt inspired to do well because of a talented and skilled leader, I was driven by fear to perform at my absolute best. So I worked harder, and my work was impeccable. I committed fully to being better than everyone just to save my own arse from a public flogging. It was everyone for themselves, and the result was that we were siloed from each other, not representing or embodying the principle of kotahitaka. We were not working harmoniously or collectively to achieve our common goals. When James made the portioning error, we had no opportunity to talk together about how we could fix the problem. There would have been solutions and future approaches to be learnt from this mistake, but we were silenced.

Manaakitaka is the concept in which we create and value a warm environment and respect for each other, allowing those around us to be the best they can be. Creating a space in which to flourish and upholding everyone's mana and integrity. Whanaungataka involves caring for and working harmoniously with others to achieve common goals using relational strategies.

The actions of Brent and the environment his actions created never allowed these te ao Māori principles to emerge. Manaakitaka, kotahitaka, and whanaungataka were sucked out of the space along with the air.

Upon reflection, I feel ashamed that I didn't protect James and didn't act. I know there was no need to take that stance. It just didn't have to happen like that. I can say, however, that I was influenced for some time by Brent and, to a degree, mimicked aspects of his behaviour. I don't possess the same vocabulary, and I never raised my voice. I always took people aside if it was serious and I respected their privacy. Humiliating people is not my thing. But I did pick up a little trick of being the dog with the bone when it came to proving a point. I would also drill.

It would be great to explain away these truths by saying, "Well, that's how it was then. It was a different world, and that was the culture." And that's also true. But now, the world has changed, and we have learned that such behaviour is not the way forward, and is just not acceptable. We must care about each other more. We can create a workplace culture that is both productive and pretty good fun. And because of that potential to change, I don't feel proud of myself for that past behaviour. I regret it.

I've taught myself that I can just pause in situations when something is not right because someone is not performing as they should. I have a right royal internal battle at such times. But I have learnt that there's a lot to be gained from creating an empty space! Just pausing and sitting with things quietly, I can let people carry on happily making a bad job of something.

I'm also not as much of a control freak. My previous habit was to jump in to prevent an error before it happened and then monitor closely. When the mistake was repeated again and again, I would come down hard and get all interrogational. Instead, I now leave a space. This space gives me time to think and heightens my self-awareness. It's actually kind of fascinating to observe myself in such moments. It wasn't an overnight transformation! But I recently had real success with this approach. I had shown a person how to change the way they were performing a particular task. This person continued with the method they had been using instead of adopting the process I had demonstrated. I asked them to change their process again and backed off. They continued approaching the task using their initial method another two or three times, then suddenly stopped their process and finally adopted my approach. It was like a real miracle.

Through such experiences, I have learned that fostering an atmosphere of ease, trusting that others will eventually "get it," and allowing them more time to learn can genuinely encourage people to engage with the shared goal and become team players. This approach creates a supportive environment where individuals can thrive and perform at their best. While the principles of manaakitaka, kotahitaka, and whanaungataka were lacking in the kitchen culture of my own training, I now see how they play a key role in developing the next generation of aspiring chefs.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As a junior chef, our focus was to "get the job done as fast and perfectly as possible and ensure the Chef was pleased." At the time, it was difficult to apply positive examples of manaakitaka, kotahitaka, and whanaungataka within professional kitchen environments. That was simply the way things were. Yet, amidst the intensity, there were also moments of joy: camaraderie, laughter, and strong friendships. However, workplace priorities were different then.

Reflecting on these experiences through the lens of these principles today highlights the profound life lessons I have learned and the personal growth I have achieved since those early days. I now recognise that the industry culture and socialisation I was immersed in actually hindered aspects of my personal development—an unfortunate reality for any young person. This realisation has been gradual but deeply transformative. I have retained my humour and can now find amusement in situations that once felt overwhelming. More importantly, I am excited about what lies ahead. The core of who I am remains intact, but through experience and growth, I have refined that foundation into a stronger, more authentic version of myself, one that will guide me confidently into the next chapter of my professional journey.

D. M. Price is the pseudonym of a seasoned New Zealand chef with 30 years in the hospitality industry leading award-winning restaurants and luxury lodges. Her professional practice and research interests focus on sustainable food systems, with a particular emphasis on hospitality staff well-being and community food resilience. She holds a Bachelor of Culinary Arts from Otago Polytechnic and is currently studying towards a Graduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching from Massey University.

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