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## INSPIRATION AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGN PRACTICE IN PŪMANAWA FOR THE SWEET KITCHEN

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# INSPIRATION AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGN PRACTICE IN PŪMANAWA FOR THE SWEET KITCHEN

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea that chefs are designers is not new (Betts, 2023; Kern et al., 2015; Kudrowitz, 2014; Ottenbacher, 2007; Page, 2017), and is a foundational principle for the Bachelor of Culinary Arts (BCA) programme at Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand (Mitchell, 2018; Woodhouse, 2017). Instead of merely recreating and reproducing the same dish, as is typical of traditional cookery pedagogy, the courses within the BCA focus on developing not only a student's technical skills, but their approach to design processes embedded in contemporary dish creation and development through project based learning (Mitchell, 2018; Woodhouse, 2017). At the foundational level, the programme embodies the concept that “everything is a remix,” an idea popularised by documentarian Kirby Ferguson (2023). Ferguson speaks to the concept that there is no such thing as an original idea—creative ideas are derived from the inspiration of existing work and the act of remixing is not about replication, but transformation. It is known that chefs often look to other chefs' practice for inspiration in their own work (Kudrowitz, 2014). In practice, culinarians also bring their own experiences as inspiration to the table, making their process and their final dish unique.

Building on established culinary design practices, the Pūmanawa for the Sweet Kitchen course in the first year of the BCA programme is designed to introduce ākonga (learners/students) to fundamental design processes for pūmanawa toi kai (food creative practice), within the context of bakery and dessert skills and design. The word “pūmanawa” can loosely be translated to mean skill and talent (Te Aka Māori Dictionary, 2016) and is often associated with creativity and strength in learning. The Pūmanawa for the Sweet Kitchen course emphasises skill development and using fundamental design processes, design tools, and critical thinking to fulfil a specific design brief.

The project brief challenged ākonga to “design, develop, and create a sweet kai item and stylised photograph inspired by a contemporary culinarian of their choice.” Ākonga were tasked with investigating the cookery techniques and approach to dessert design of their chosen culinarian. They also researched the way in which those dishes were presented in different media formats, and then drew on their findings to emulate their culinarian in their own practice and final dish and photograph outcome. For ākonga, this project offered a chance to merge their personal stories with the methodologies of contemporary dessert masters, allowing space for personal influence and autonomy, and thereby enabling them to create dishes that were as innovative as they were meaningful.

This paper will review some BCA students' work, in relation to the specified brief, and provide examples of how the inspiration and design process emulated the real-life practice of dish design in industry, and demonstrated clear student engagement.

## THE PROCESS

Following an adapted “double diamond” design process model of “discover, define, develop and deliver” (Mitchell et al., 2013), ākongā first investigated their chosen culinarian. This phase involved researching and documenting the culinarian’s approach to food design; including the materials they use, how they practice, and why they approach dish design and delivery in this way.

As part of the course, ākongā explored how chefs use design tools such as SCAMPER (substitute, combine, adjust, magnify/minify, put to other uses, eliminate, rearrange), mind-mapping, flavour bouncing, and research to develop their dishes. Based on this real-world practice, ākongā brought some of their own stories to the table, using sources of inspiration such as nostalgia, existing desserts, dietary restrictions, seasonal produce, and food science to generate multiple dish ideas that could meet the brief.

The idea generation phase resulted in a final dish concept that was taken forward for prototyping and testing. The development of the students’ dishes was an iterative process aimed at refining techniques, sensory balance, and food styling, culminating in a food photography session. The images of their dish were to be used in a food media presentation in a style typical of their culinarian. All ākongā in the cohort completed the process. While the final food media piece was not the key focus of the dessert design, some revelled in the creative freedom this task allowed and produced exceptional results, some of which are featured below.



Figure 1 and Figure 2. “Chemistry” by Emily Gilbert.  
Photographs: Hayley Dodd.

## THE WORK

By studying the methods of established chefs and adapting them through lenses such as molecular gastronomy, dietary restrictions, nostalgia, and classic flavour pairings, five culinary students created the diverse dish creations featured below. These dishes demonstrate how different creative processes can intersect to produce innovative culinary outcomes from ākonga that reflect both original takes on existing ideas and intentional design. The final works showcase not only technical growth, but also a deepening of creative confidence and individual expression, qualities that can be identified in chefs around the world.

### Scientific remix: Designing with molecular gastronomy and place

With a family history of working in chemistry and the sciences, ākonga Emily Gilbert created a dish inspired by experimentation, the pH scale, and certain ingredients known for their reactive and transformational properties. Their practice evoked the style of Reynold Poernomo, an innovative Australian chef known for incorporating elements of surprise in his desserts. Emily's dessert, "Chemistry" (Figures 1 and 2), leans into molecular gastronomy. Butterfly pea flower tea, an ingredient that changes colour depending on the acidity of what it is combined with, was used to create a dish with blue, pink, and purple hues, tied together with a flavour profile inspired by ingredients from Aotearoa New Zealand such as mānuka honey and kawakawa. This dish not only looked visually stunning but offered a range of textures and intense flavours on the palate with fizzing sherbet, gummy lemon 'caviar,' chewy stained-glass pear, fluffy mānuka honey sponge, and delicate creamy kawakawa mousse; inspired twists on some classic dessert and pastry components. Emily's work epitomised pūmanawa, by merging scientific precision with artistic creativity and talent.

### Storytelling with flavour

Looking to childhood memories of her home garden and highlighting a strong flavour profile of lemon and lavender, Georgia Anderson created cupcakes in the style of renowned New Zealand blogger Erin Clarkson and her blog, *Cloudy Kitchen*. Georgia's practice of meticulous testing and making small incremental changes to perfect a recipe, along with her final dish and her food writing piece, were so much in the style of Erin Clarkson that one would struggle to tell the resulting blog post apart from a *Cloudy Kitchen* original (Figure 3). In keeping with the theme of transformation, this dish was based on some of the *Cloudy Kitchen* recipes but tweaked in the development process to produce a different dish entirely—a practice that Erin often employs in her own work (Clarkson, n.d.). Georgia's final blog post, styled and written in the tone of Clarkson's platform, demonstrated not only technical skill but a deep understanding of storytelling through food.

### LAVENDER HONEY CUPCAKES WITH LAVENDER SWISS MERINGUE BUTTERCREAM AND LEMON CURD FILLING

By [Georgia Anderson](#) on 29th May, 2024 (updated 22nd July, 2024)

★★★★★ 5 from 71 reviews

11 community comments

Jump to Recipe

These light, tasty lavender and honey cupcakes are topped with a smooth swirl of lavender buttercream and filled with a tangy lemon curd. Try swapping and substituting your cupcake and buttercream flavours to create your own cupcake combinations.



Figure 3. Anderson's version of a *Cloudy Kitchen*-style blog post (see Clarkson, 2023).

## Creativity driven by constraints

Global culinary trends highlight the growth of dietary inclusivity (Mellentini, 2025), inspiring Aaliyah Lovatt's twist on the classic macaron; a dessert popularised by Pierre Hermé, "The King of Macarons." This ākongā drew from Hermé's use of bold flavour combinations to create feijoa-ginger and elderflower-lemongrass flavoured macarons. Moreover, these dishes were developed to suit a keto diet, which is characterised by minimal to no sugar and carbohydrate content. Lovatt's innovative approach to removing sugar and carbohydrates while maintaining texture and flavour pushed the boundaries of traditional pastry-making. While the outcome visually resembled macarons, the student reflected that the transformation process may have resulted in something entirely new, highlighting the importance of open-mindedness in innovative dish design. This work reflected both contemporary culinary trends in dietary inclusivity and the core principle of transformation inherent in our Pūmanawa for the Sweet Kitchen course.



Figure 4. Feijoa and ginger keto macaron by Aaliyah Lovatt. Photograph: Hayley Dodd.



Figure 5. Elderflower and lemongrass keto macaron by Aaliyah Lovatt. Photograph: Hayley Dodd.

## Transforming tradition

Drawing inspiration from Giapo, a renowned Auckland-based gelato innovator, and in a similar fashion to the students discussed above, Reuben Hanna utilised a well-established flavour profile in his dessert creation—a twist on the humble apple and rhubarb crumble. Transforming this comforting, warm dessert into an extravagant ice-cream in the style of Giapo required this ākonga to use a wide range of design tools and cookery techniques to problem solve during the iterative process. Creating a dish with several components, but two main flavours, resulted in a highly experimental testing phase to work out which flavour went best with each element. Through extensive experimentation with textures—dehydrated crisps, purées, and crumbles—Reuben created a visually striking and intensely flavourful dish. The experimentation continued to the photoshoot day, where he adjusted his final dish with different elements. His ability to iterate and problem-solve throughout the design process exemplified the deliberate practice and refinement of ideas that are integral aspects of the BCA programme.



Figures 6, 7, and 8. Same same but different: Reuben's Giapo-style adaption of apple and rhubarb crumble.  
Photographs: Hayley Dodd.

## Value driven design

Core values along with childhood memories of a favourite bakery inspired Ruby Lawes to develop her lemon-raspberry twist on a tiramisu. After establishing constraints based on insights gained from her research into Kim Evans from Little and Friday Bakery, she then worked to create a sharing-style dessert that utilised accessible ingredients. Lawes also created a detailed recipe and step-by-step images to help those at home who might want to re-create this recipe—all important aspects of Kim's work (Evans, 2021). Keeping sustainable practice and mindful cooking at the forefront of recipe development was as important to Lawes as it is to Evans. Lawes reflects in her portfolio that developing the dish prompted a deeper respect for ingredients and flavours, an appreciation for listening to them, and a desire to celebrate those she enjoys by sharing the results with others she cares about.

As with the others, within Lawes's work, there is the sense that by transforming other culinarians' processes and outcomes and emulating their practice, one's own dish creation process can benefit from a deeper understanding of one's own practice and self.



### Lemon & Raspberry Tiramisu

This is a wonderful dessert to bring along to gatherings and to celebrate the day's events. It is a wonderful dish and shared between those who love to eat.

**Sponge fingers**  
 4 eggs, separated  
 270 g caster sugar  
 1/2 tsp baking powder  
 100 g of digestive biscuits

**Mascarpone cream**  
 240 g mascarpone  
 1 cup double cream  
 1 tsp maple syrup  
 1/2 tsp vanilla essence or pinch of salt

**To assemble**  
 1 recipe Lemon Card (see page 4)  
 1 recipe Raspberry Card (see page 4)  
 1 recipe Raspberry syrup (see page 4)  
 Raspberry powder for dusting

**Make 1 large batch**  
 Preheat oven to 200°C and line 8 trays with baking paper. Remove 8 trays of caster sugar from the given amount and set aside to heat with the egg whites. Combine the remainder of the sugar with the egg yolks and beat until a thick paste or shortbread consistency. Transfer the mixture to a large metal bowl.  
 Whip the egg whites with a stand mixer or electric beater until soft peaks start to form. Add 8 trays of caster sugar then continue to whip until stiff peaks and the mixture is glossy and voluminous. Add half of the egg whites to the bowl with the yolk mixture and use a rubber spatula to gently fold them together. During this process, it is important not to overmix the batter or knock the air out of it. Once the egg whites and yolk are evenly combined, mix in the dry ingredients and add the remainder of the egg whites. Gently fold the mixture with a rubber spatula until it is evenly combined, being careful not to overmix.  
 Transfer the mix to a piping bag with a medium round nozzle. Pipe sprays of sugar roughly 5 mm long onto the prepared trays. They will expand in the oven so make sure to leave a slim gap between the rows. Put them in the oven for 8 minutes or until the bottoms start to become golden. Set aside to cool.  
 For the mascarpone cream, combine all ingredients and beat until a stand mixer or electric beater until stiff peaks form, being careful not to overwhip. In a separate bowl, gradually combine the mascarpone cream and lemon zest by hand, starting as low as you can if you are happy with the sheerness of the lemon in the cream.  
 To assemble, soak the sponge fingers in the raspberry syrup until they are soft and fully saturated. Place them on the bottom of your serving dish and drizzle a few extra spoonfuls of syrup over your sponges. Pipe a layer of mascarpone cream over the sponges then top that with a generous amount of meringue. Add another layer of soaked sponges. Repeat, add some extra syrup or meringue on top of the sponges if you are serving these dishes with a second layer of cream and a dusting of raspberry powder.



Figure 9. Lawes's twist on classic tiramisu, in the style of Kim Evans from Little and Friday.

## CONCLUSION

This Pūmanawa for the Sweet Kitchen project served as more than a creative exercise—it was a structured invitation for ākonga to step into the roles of culinary designers. One of the most profound outcomes of this project was the way in which ākonga deepened their understanding of their own creative identity. By immersing themselves in the work of established culinarians and reflecting on their own practice, our ākonga, like many chefs around the world, not only refined their technical skills but also discovered new avenues for creative expression. This process of transformation was highly personal, intertwining nostalgia, storytelling, and constraints with design thinking to mirror the students' values and cultural roots.

As showcased in this review, our ākonga connected process with purpose, explored how media and presentation shape the perception of dishes, and learned to communicate meaning through flavour and form. This project not only resulted in a diverse range of work but highlighted differences in approach to the dish design process and to working with sources of inspiration in the transformation of existing recipes into something novel, even at an emergent level.

This review of work stands as a testament to the power of design thinking in culinary education. Through practice, deep reflection, and creative autonomy, ākonga not only produced technically exceptional and visually stunning dishes but also developed a profound connection to their own practice and identity. This review of student work offers a glimpse into how pūmanawa toi kai (food creative practice) can be nurtured through an environment that values creativity, collaboration, and cultural expression (Mitchell et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2018; Woodhouse, 2017). By transforming the work of contemporary dessert masters and embedding their own narratives, these ākonga have taken their first steps as creative and skilled contributors to our industry.



Figure 10. Lawes's Lemon and Raspberry Tiramisu.

## AI statement

ChatGPT was used to assist with grammar and sentence structure and for final proofreading.

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