

## WHAKAPAPA FRIDAYS – Are we feeding our manuhiri to death?

Our relationship with food as Māori extends back to our understanding of the creation of the universe. The atua (Māori god) Tāne was responsible for separating his parents Ranginui and Papatūānuku, who are at times described as Sky Father and Earth Mother. Despite Tāne's actions towards his parents, a number of his brothers disapproved of the act. As a result, Tāne's brother Tāwhirimātea, the atua of the various winds and storms, attacked Tāne and his siblings who supported the separation of his parents. The trees of Tāne were uprooted and thrown aside, while some trees simply snapped in two. The ocean of Tangaroa grew with great swells that forced some of Tangaroa's children to flee to deeper water (fish) and others moved inland to hide (reptiles). Haumiātiketike (uncultivated food) and Rongomatāne (cultivated crops) hid within Papatūānuku and you can still find them there today in the forms of aruhe (fern-root) and kūmara (sweet potato).

Tūmatauenga was the only brother that defied Tāwhirimātea as he stood fiercely against the hurricane winds. After defeating Tāwhirimātea, Tū turned to his cowering brothers and attacked each of them individually for deserting him in battle. Tūmatauenga sets his snares in the forest to catch the birds of Tāne, he casts his nets to the ocean to catch the fish of Tangaroa, and he creates tools to unearth plants and edible roots. Tūmatauenga then devours the children of his brothers and in his revenge, consumes all of them. This is the Māori origin of nutrition, or the rationale for eating the various foods we find in nature.

This legend guides us towards our understanding of the origin of various foods. Each food item has a relationship, or is descended from an atua. This relationship creates an understanding of its nutritional value, the source of its spiritual energy, and its mana-enhancing power. This might sound a little ‘woo-woo’, but as Māori, the physical and spiritual worlds are not void of each other, but rather they coexist. This is the basis for eating natural foods as Māori, it is not specifically Paleo, vegan, or vegetarian, but a Māori approach.

So here is your number one nutritional tip for healthier living - Eat natural foods. This means that manufactured and ‘plastic’ foods no longer fit this Māori rationale. This includes pretty much all fast food outlets, fizzy drinks, sugary sweets, and almost all food found in the middle isles of the supermarket. Nothing you probably didn’t know already. So why is it, that we know that certain foods are no good for us, yet we still eat them, and even worse than that, we serve it to our guests?

Manakitanga is about reciprocal hospitality and is a cornerstone of how Māori societies function. Uplifting the mana or prestige and power of others enhanced relationships between groups and individuals. A function of manakitanga is the way we care for our visitors, and as such food plays a big part of this practice. Traditionally, the best food items and delicacies were shared with esteemed guests, a sign of respect to our visitors for sharing the best we had to offer. Villages often had to ensure they always had enough kai in their food-stores to feed any unexpected guests. Failing to do so could have detrimental effects on the mana of the tribe.

Fast-forward to the present day and manakitanga is still a core component of how Māori groups and individuals interact, especially on the marae. However, there is one big

difference. With advances in technology and food manufacturing practices, the food available to us to prepare and share with our manuhiri is vastly different than the natural foods shared in the past. As a result, many have sacrificed quality natural foods that uplift the mana and wellbeing of our guests for fast, cheap and filling foods. This is often food that looks plentiful, satisfies the puku but is void of any connection to atua or has a positive wairua. These include foods that are high in sugars (cordial, steam pudding), contain refined carbohydrates (bread, pasta), or are cooked in rancid oils (fried bread). These meals lead to a short-term outcome of feeding our guests out of manaakitanga, however, we unconsciously contribute to their poor health and wellbeing in the long term.

If manaakitanga is about uplifting the mana of others, slowly killing them by feeding them unhealthy food surely is not doing the job. It's one thing to eat poorly yourself, it's quite another to feed it to others. It's great to see some marae improving the food options they make in feeding their manuhiri, however I believe a more drastic approach is required. Marae tikanga should shape the way we present food for manuhiri, and so in my opinion all marae should be sugar-free. Reducing the amount of added sugar on marae would eliminate another system contributing to obesity outcomes. We took a stance against smoking years ago and made marae smoke free because of the known threat to our health. Why don't we make a strong play as Māori at the way we feed our guests?

Te Miri Rangi

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