

good living

A generous tradition

Indigenous food is made to share, writes Mark Chipperfield.

A small clearing deep inside an ancient beech forest in New Zealand's remote Kaweka Ranges is not the most obvious place to conduct a cooking demonstration but that's what Tom Loughlin, my Maori host, has in mind.

"Ever eaten off hot rocks?" he asks, busying himself around a small camp fire. "The secret is to wait until they are really white hot - you also need a little water to wash off any ash. You'll love this."

Apart from being appointed as kaitiaki (guardian) over this untamed 2023-hectare tract of Maori land, Loughlin, 47, is also a City and Guilds-trained chef who has worked in kitchens around the world, including London, Norfolk Island and NSW.

"I'm going to cook some wild venison that we hunted right here at Tamau Pa - real wild food," he says. "It's been marinated overnight in some light soy and chopped garlic. Nothing too fancy."

The lean venison steaks, cooked in about three minutes on the hot volcanic rocks, are served in basic white hamburger rolls but the taste (smoky, gamey and dense) is unforgettable. I let the juice dribble wickedly down my chin on to the forest floor.

Set up two years ago, The Kai Waho Experience is part of a renaissance of Maori language, culture and ceremony that is taking place across New Zealand, from the Bay of Islands to Invercargill.

Things have been slower on this side of the Tasman. Although there are established indigenous tourist operations in places such as Uluru, the Daintree and the Flinders Ranges, finding a bush tucker experience closer to Sydney is still quite a challenge.

Perhaps the best-known tour is the Tribal Warrior Harbour Cruise, an Aboriginal-hosted cultural experience (looking at fishing methods and food gathering techniques) that has been running on Sydney Harbour since 1998



(there is a similar river cruise at Port Jackson).

Meanwhile, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has been developing a number of bush tucker tours across the state, including one called Yun Yi Barragay at Port Macquarie.

At the Royal Botanic Gardens every Friday, Aboriginal education officer Clarence Slockee takes a one-hour tour that explores heritage, music and bush foods.

Loughlin is a highly skilled, entrepreneurial Maori who is adept at walking in both the European and Polynesian worlds and willing to share his culture with generosity; indeed, hospitality is another deeply held Maori principle.

As Loughlin explains, although

traditional food sources (native greens, eels, pigeons, muttonbird, duck, kumara and Maori potato) have now widened to include sika deer, wild pig and trout, the underlying relationship between Maori and the land is unchanged.

"We are the custodians of the land, its ngati tuwharetoa kaitiaki (tribal caretakers)," he says. "It's our responsibility to protect the land, honour the gods and ensure that it will provide food for future generations. That's how things were always done back in the day."

Five generations of Loughlin's family have lived, farmed and hunted on these ancient tribal lands and it's a privilege to accompany him as he lays eel nets in the ice-cold Ripia River, tracks



True local knowledge ... (left) Tom Loughlin's Maori methods make learning a tasty experience; Aboriginal education officer Clarence Slockee shows visitors a wattle seed in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens. Photo: Quentin Jones

GET A TASTE FOR TRADITION

The **Kai Waho Experience** is available in either a one- or multiple-day format. Prices start at \$NZ1200 (\$1107) for two people; bookings through Ahipara Luxury Travel, +64 9 446 6025, see ahipara.com.

In Sydney, the two-hour **Tribal Warrior Cruise** (\$60 per person) operates from Wednesday to Sunday; bookings 9699 3491, see

www.captaincook.com.au. The **Aboriginal Tour of Djebahn** (\$80) runs twice daily; bookings 9544 1400, see cronulliacruises.com. **Yun Yi Barragay** (\$15/\$5) operates on the third Sunday of every month; phone 6582 3355 for more information. **Aboriginal Heritage Tour**, Royal Botanic Gardens, every Friday (\$28); bookings 9231 8134.

wild deer through the forest or plants potatoes, Maori-style, in his garden.

"When our ancestors came here from Polynesia, everything was foreign," he says. "Kumara was one of the few things that our people had brought with them, which is why it is so prized."

Not only do visitors to Tamau Pa see kai (food) being gathered, they also get to witness a wide range of traditional cooking techniques. Apart from hot stones, Tom is also skilled at steaming and underground baking - using a purpose-built hangi oven.

A typical feast from the hangi consists of titi (muttonbird), wild pig with native asparagus, chicken, slow-baked kumara and potato and

a hunk of wild venison - all washed down with a glass of sauvignon blanc or a Tui beer.

Maori were a hunter-gatherer people. Food preservation was essential for their survival during the winter. Loughlin demonstrates techniques that have changed little since his ancestors first landed in Aotearoa 1000 years ago.

"These mountains have fed and clothed my people for generations," he says. "We live in harmony with the land, treating it with respect."

"Today, we're relearning many of the tikanga [rules] that have been lost. But this is not just for the Maori alone. It is something we're happy to share. We're all on same journey, eh?"