

PAKEHA HANGI MAKES GOOD KAI

BY KEITH INGRAM



As a lad growing up, the prospect of a social gathering and a hangi for good kai was an event in itself. The hangi pit would be uncovered and the stones that had survived a year of cooking were stacked on a mountain of tea tree or whatever wood was available. The fire was lit as the food was prepared.

Invariably it was a social event for the cooks, as preparation took most of the day. Guests would arrive and there would be much talk and lubricating of the lips before the hangi was opened and the kai revealed for everyone to enjoy.

Yes, I have seen good hangi and bad hangi, and the lessons I learnt from my old dad gave me the confidence to put down my share of good hangi over the years.

Nowadays we don't have space in modern suburbia for a pit and backyard fires are a no-no. So it was with some joy I discovered the Universal Food Oven, or UFO cooker, as it is more affectionately known, with the prospect of once again putting down a hangi for guests. This time I would use a few pakeha skills, hence the name "pakeha hangi".

I returned home from shopping just before 1600 and our guests were due to arrive from 1800 for dinner, so it was certainly going to be a test.

As we unpacked the cooker we found it could also work as a smoker or steamer. It comes complete, apart from the gas bottle, and after a quick read of the instructions and a wash and rinse we were ready to prepare the kai.

We were having a leg of lamb, which I had basted in whole grain mustard, salt and pepper and freshly chopped rosemary from the garden. We also had a number 25 boned-out chook basted in spicy sauce.

A full range of favourite hangi vegetables was quickly prepared and washed, including potatoes, kumara, carrots, parsnip, onions and pumpkin, along with the leaves of a large cabbage.

The baskets were lined in tin foil and cabbage leaves and the meat placed in the lower basket and covered with more cabbage leaves. The next basket was lined in a similar way and the vegetables placed in groups, as guests would serve themselves directly from the basket.



Add a sprig of mint to the tatties, a sprinkle of salt and pepper or any other seasoning you might like. I find a sprinkle with one of the new gourmet smoked and seasoned sea salts add to the flavour during the steaming process. After covering it with cabbage we were ready to load the cooker.

As per the instructions, I added 2.5 litres of water and dropped a couple of sprigs of rosemary in the bottom before placing the baskets on the lid and setting it alight on full power.

The kai would be ready in 2.5 hours, the instructions said, but just to be sure we gave it another 15 minutes, which we didn't really need to do, as any longer and the meat would have been falling apart. If you had a full load of packed-in tucker to feed 25 or more, the extra time could be handy.

Meanwhile, the missus prepared fresh greens, broccoli and bok choy. With the prospect of a chocolate mud cake to follow we were ready to enjoy.

The result is always in the eating and while the kai was cooked to perfection, but to be honest, that hint of earthy, smoky flavour synonymous with the traditional hangi was missing.

If this is the only criticism, a bit of trial and error by adding some smoked sawdust to the water or smoked seasoning to the food could produce a bloody good kai that will give most people more than their fill, without having to dig up the back yard.

From the start to serving was four hours and the magic part was that one could spend time enjoying the company of guests while the kai looked after itself.

For seafood lovers, I am waiting for summer when half a sack of fat and juicy Greenlip mussels can be cooked immediately for guests to enjoy as they talk, shuck, dip and enjoy with freshly buttered bread. Like bees to a honey pot, it's the focus of attention as one enjoys good kai.

Not only that, but with a bit of thought and the preparation of a heat-resistant base and a couple of safety ties, there's no reason why this could not work on the deck of our boat when we're rafted up with friends enjoying a harvest of kaimoana from the sea. The UFO passed our test with flying colours and comes highly recommended. Enjoy.

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