THE MAORI MIX

Living the Kiwi life can bring you closer to nature and revelations, says SUPRIYA SEHGAL

MY induction into the Maori life started early during a trip to Auckland. I had driven to Rewi Spraggon's house on the first day, heading west to Te Henga Hills, bordered by Bethells Beach along the coast of the North Island of New Zealand. Pastoral views along the drive were made up of rolling lush green hills, dotted with white sheep in an expected 'Kiwi' landscape. What I didn't expect was my absolute disregard of having been previously vegetarian and switching to carnivorous level of non-vegetarian camp quite rapidly. But that tends to happen when you taste the food made by the greatest Hangi chef in the country. A cheerful *Ki ora* greeting, typical of Kiwis, set the tone for the incredible afternoon that lay ahead.

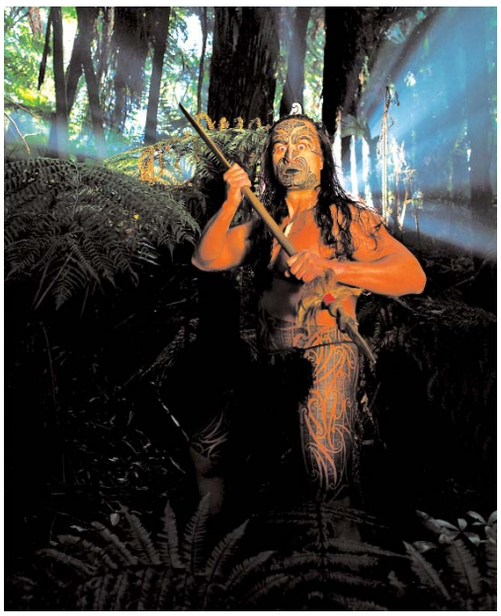
Standing in Rewi's backyard over a stone-lined pit, the story of Hangi unraveled. Hangi, quite simply translated to "earth oven", is the traditional food of the Maoris, the first settlers on the islands of New Zealand. An opportunity to grow up in his grandmother's house, paved the way for Rewi's interest in food and his stellar effort to give Hangi a much-needed resurgence in the last few years. After a circuitous career as a chef in several countries, Rewi decided to go back to the roots and give New Zealand a dish that was getting relegated to oblivion — and that too, in its most authentic form. Hangi is the oldest dish of the country, going back in time to more than 1,000 years. It once dominated the kitchens of the Polynesian tribes. It refers to slow-cooked food that is lined in a pit of stones and covered with cabbage leaves, wood and mud for a smoky flavour. While traditionally, the meat consisted of birds, fish and anything that the tribes could get their hands on, Rewi now uses the famous New Zealand lamb cuts, chicken, yam and sweet potatoes.

Our food had been cooking since seven hours when I arrived. A few hours into the conversation,

Rewi Spraggon in his backyard

and it was ready to be hauled out of the pit. I peered over the thick stones, as Rewi excavated stainless steel trays from a bouldery layer of earth, with bundles of cabbage-lined goodies inside. He shaved off the meat onto a large plate and arranged the veggies in another for lunch.

Head hung low to the chin, concentrating on the plate, I had a minor epiphany — I wasn't ever going to be a real vegetarian. It must have been 20 minutes without a word as we worked our way through a heap of lamb, chicken and other Hangi spoils. When done, I looked up, smiling and satisfied, with only one last question. Were Rewi's fully tattooed arms a mark of a Maori man? "Not quite", came the answer. I would be seeing the real Maori tattoos and more of the culture at Rotorua, one of the few Maori hubs that lies smack dab in the core of the North Island.



Rewi's words rang in my head later in the week as I set foot in Mitai Maori Village one evening. I had signed up for a few hours of a cultural show that gives visitors an insight into how the Maoris set foot on this region, harnessing the geo thermal activity of this land and creating a thriving community for hundreds of years. Having tasted Hangi before, the charm for me lay in watching the fierce

Cultural Performance of Haka — Mitai Maori village

Preparing the Hangi and Arekatera Maihi

Haka war dance, a recreation of how the Maoris came paddling in *wakas* (canoes) to this land and of course, *ta moko* the traditional tattoos of the Maoris. The evening started with a *Powhiri,* the traditional welcome. The audience watched in awe as a *Wero* (challenge) from a warrior and a *Karanga* (welcome call) from a female host livened up the stage. This was followed by *Whaikorero* (welcome speeches) and *Waiata* (songs), after which, the evening progressed into seeing the warrior tribes paddle in a stream on traditional canoes — their war cries ringing through the awed silence of the audience. There was *Nohongiyet* — a traditional Maori greeting, which involves pressing noses. I assumed that the size of the audience — hundreds of us — had something to do with it. We moved to a Hangi dinner, the flavours of Rewi's pit flashing back to me. There was no sign of *ta moko* here, but my Maori rendezvous wasn't over yet.

Over the next two days in Rotorua, I got a chance to visit Te Puia, a flourishing centre of Maori culture and showcase of geothermal wonders, which is located in the Whakarewarewa Valley. After a walk around the incredible complex,

full of bubbling mud pools, acidic ponds and geysers, I sat for another Hangi lunch with first row seats to the Phutu geyser, that erupts every hour or so. But I was more interested to know more about the Maori tattoo and *Harakeke* (flax) treasures that are used for weaving. Soon, I was joined by Arekatera Maihi, simply known as Katz, the *tumu* (head) of the wood-carving division of the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute. Deep lines ran along his forehead, circling around the eyes and going over his nose and chin. It was difficult to keep myself from staring right at them but Katz is accustomed to the attention he garners. He explained how every *ta moko* translates a


A Hongi greeting

person's own story and background into a design on the skin. It is more than just an aesthetic for a Maori. Each design emanates from a tribal identity indicating the person's family and tribal lineage, and his or her accomplishments and even marital status. It is a spiritual experience that is beyond the realm of tattooing for a cosmetic embellishment.

Katz's passion about the *ta moko* was resonated by another group at Te Puia — the women weavers hunched over looms or preparing the *harakeke* with their mussel shells. I was told that flax is used to its full potential to make anything from *Kahu Kuri* (cloaks) *Piupiu* (flax skirts) *Pake* or (rain capes) *Whariki Takapau* (floor mats) *Kete* (woven baskets) and *Tukutuku* (panels placed into the carved meeting house). I sat with the head weaver, as she explained how the *harakeke* is harvested and prepared before it can be applied anywhere. First, it is split to dislodge tough edges and divided into strips and sorted as per lengths. The strips are then scraped with a mussel shell to remove excess moisture, rendering it soft and flexible. The fibre content called *muka* is then extracted with a shell and rolled and twisted in a process called *miro* (twining) and then beaten with a *patu muka* (stone), to make it more pliable. And then comes the magic of weaving patiently to make the products, which are veritable treasures for the families.

Time flew at Te Puia and it was finally time to leave the region for the next leg of the journey. There was one thing that was still missing in my Maori experience — a *hongi*. It was, as if, John, my guide for the trip, had read my mind. My farewell was personal and memorable, as John bent down and pressed his nose against mine, in a fitting Maori farewell.

The weaving school at Te Puia