



Chef Rewi Spraggon prepares a tray of ingredients for the earth oven.

The fact that Chef Rewi Spraggon's house is located at 'Glowworm Hill' in the Te Henga region of New Zealand's Northern Island is intriguing enough. But it's the 12-square-foot smoking, muddy pit in the backyard of his house that piques curiosity. I had seen only pictures of earth ovens, so I was curious to witness one at work and to taste its produce. And where better to do it than the house of Rewi, one of New Zealand's most experimental chefs who is bringing focus back on the oldest cuisine in the country—Hāngi. And the unremarkable pit is where all the magic happens.

It was my first day in Auckland, and I decided to kickstart the two-week trip with food. As an ambivalent vegetarian for years, I held off on committing to Rewi's meat-centric cuisine until I could gauge its look and aroma. I was on my seventh month of abstinence from meat; the food would have to really deliver for me to switch preferences.

I first drove west towards Bethells Beach, around 40 kilometres away. Both Auckland's traffic as well as its natural beauty, have a formidable reputation,

COURTESY OF REWI SPRAGGON

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Chef Spraggon's food truck is a favourite at Auckland's street markets.



so I kept enough time for the road. Once out of the incessant break-go-break routine of the city, the unadulterated pastoral charm of the countryside took over. Soft rolling hills were painted entirely in a palette of greens, the blue sky hung low, and tall trees jumped out of the low hills in the distance. White picket fences kept cows and sheep from jumping over.

Driving up the Te Henga Hill, it wasn't difficult to spot the 'Glowworm' signage on the left. Perched on the flat top of the hill, a white house was foregrounded by a large black and orange truck with the words 'Hāngi Master' emblazoned on it. Behind the truck stood an equally impressive man, Māori lineage apparent in his sturdy six-foot-plus build, arms fully tattooed, and a warm smile clinging to his face. We greeted each other with a quintessential Māori greeting, *Kia Ora*, and got right to the point. Was I ready to see the magical pit? Absolutely.

We walked around to the back of the house, across a kitchen garden, and stood over a short wooden boundary that overlooked Rewi's oven. Honestly, you have to be a special kind of traveller to get excited over a mound of dirt, wet gunny sacks, and grey rocks. My expression must have given me away, for Rewi smirked and started to narrate the history of earth-oven cooking. Steam wafted out of the earth, adding an air of mystery to his story.

Rewi explained that the Māoris, the original Polynesian settlers of New Zealand, arrived on the islands between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Warriors and hunters by profession, they also had a rich culinary culture that hinged on material available in the wilderness. Birds and fish were used before livestock began to be reared. Root vegetables like potatoes and yam were dominant, and kept the tribes well nourished. The jog of centuries morphed cooking styles, but the Māoris were able to keep a large part of their kitchen traditions intact. As a young boy, Rewi had the opportunity to live with his grandmother and see her whip up large feasts for the village in no time at the *whanau* (family home). The food was always cooked Hāngi style (in the earth oven). Communal cooking was done with the help of stones and earth, giving the food a natural smoky flavour. The heat from the stones was so effective that the food softened considerably, almost

## MOVEABLE KITCHEN

Look out for these street markets where Rewi pulls in with his black and orange food truck to serve on-the-go Hāngi dishes.



# Food of the Earth

The Māoris knew a thing or two about food, cooking it with smouldering stones in earth ovens. SUPRIYA SEHGAL spends a day in **Te Henga**, New Zealand, with an innovative chef who's putting traditional Hāngi cuisine back onto the table.



Left: Bethells Beach, on the way to Te Henga from Auckland.  
Bottom: The tray is lined with leaves before it's lowered in the earth oven.

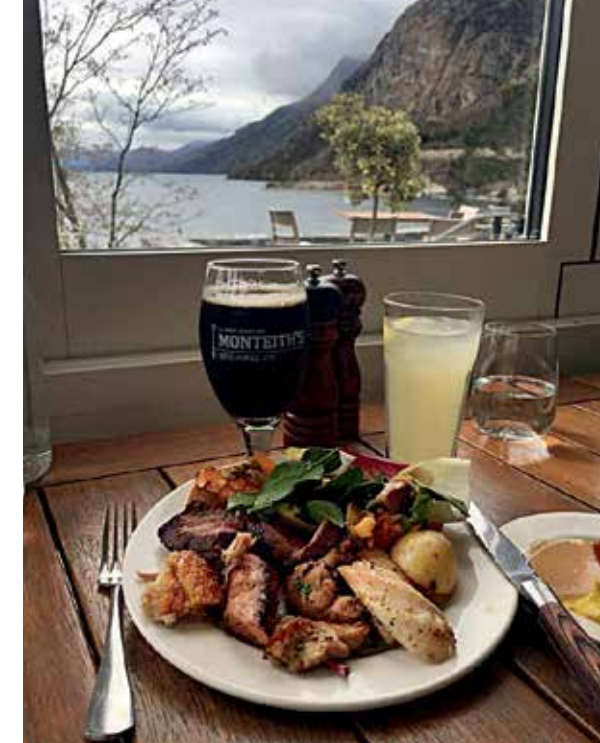
melting in the mouth. But the trick was to get the cooking time just right; it ranged from five to seven hours for various dishes.

In his younger days, Rewi travelled the world as a chef, but eventually returned to his roots with a proposition to reinvent contemporary Kiwi food, using the earth-oven method of the Māoris. Today, 45-year-old Rewi is one of the country's most celebrated chefs and remains determined to bring back the glory of traditional slow-cooked Hāngi food that nourished the original settlers of New Zealand for thousands of years. Hāngi has been experimented with earlier—it's easily available in cities. But most of the urban places use steam to cook the food. The method is faster, but lacks the strong smoky flavour of the earth ovens. In Rewi's words, it's "inauthentic".

Fascinated by the slow cooking ideology, I asked Rewi how long our food had been in the earth oven. Six hours down, and one more to go, he told me. Rewi had been up since 5 am, prepping the pit with stones, Manuka wood, and soil. He had lined stainless steel baskets with cabbage leaves, and filled them with chicken, pork, lamb, potatoes, yam, corn, pumpkin, and some more veggies.

The stones aren't ordinary and play an important part in the process. Rewi has preserved around 15 of those that were handed over to him by his grandfather. He lifted them up with a care usually reserved for relics, so that I could get a closer look. Using them is also a neat trick. Since there is no in-built temperature

**The stones used to cook Hāngi cuisine aren't ordinary and play an important part in the process. Rewi has preserved around 15 of those that were handed over to him by his grandfather.**



From left: Spraggon is an expert in estimating the amount of time each ingredient needs to cook in the pit; Hāngi food has a strong, smoky flavour.

control in the pit, and one cannot simply lift the lid to take a peek, a lot depends on the experience of the chef. Rewi can gauge how long different ingredients need to be cooked without taking a glance. Clearly, he has inherited much more than the stones from his ancestors. But the chef keeps a temperature gun handy, just in case.

While the stones cast their smoky magic on our lunch, we moved the discussion inside the house. Settled around a low table with bottles of chilled Tui beer, I listened to Rewi speak about the challenges of making Hāngi food appeal to the current generation and his collaborations with a string of restaurants and individual chefs.

There is nothing that cannot be cooked Hāngi style, so chicken tikka from an Indian friend was his latest muse. Pizza toppings for a popular chain had been debated. Hāngi meat features regularly on menus of fine-dining restaurants, where chefs are trying to tap into the Kiwi sentiment. But his most exciting collaboration came with another delightfully whimsical chef, Giapo Grazioli, who wants to use Hāngi sweet potatoes in an artisanal ice cream.

Fine dining is sweet, but it's the streets that bring him most satisfaction. The black and orange truck is a regular feature at weekly night markets, music

concerts, and festivals. Here, Rewi dishes out sandwiches and taco-like wraps with Hāngi meat stuffing—a handy way to grab your traditional meal while exploring the streets. It's the most anarchic that Rewi's Hāngi gets. The long queues and incessant questions keep his spirits up. A small video of the process plays on a screen hung on the side of his food truck.

As our lunch was declared ready to emerge from the earth, I reiterated my (wavering) loyalty to vegetarian fare. Rewi grinned with quiet confidence. Shovels in hand, we walked to the pit and peeled layer after layer of soil, gunny, and stones. Through the grey veil, I spotted two massive baskets of meat and more. We carried them to a large outdoor table and segregated the items. The meat slid off the bones quickly and smoothly. In 10 minutes, we were back in the house, beers and plates topped up.

No one spoke for the next 40 minutes. Head burrowed into the plate, I went through a pile of pork, a delicious rack of lamb, and the most unforgettable smoky chicken. Yams, potatoes, and corn made a brief appearance as well. Rewi's eyes followed me every time I visited the dining table and came back with mounds of food disproportionate to my frame. Finally, when I could consume no more, I slumped back in the chair in satisfaction. Rewi looked at me dotingly and smiled, "So, you're vegetarian?" ■

## KNOW THE TRADITIONAL HĀNGI INGREDIENTS

- HAUMIA**  
Wild vegetables
- KŪMARA**  
Sweet potato
- TANGAROA**  
Fish
- TĀNE**  
Forests and birds
- PĀPA**  
Earth (mud)
- HINEAWAAWA**  
Water from streams
- MAHUIKA**  
Fire

FROM TOP: OLGA KATRYCHENKO NEW ZEALAND/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF REWI SPRAGGON

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