

ANNUAL REPORT 2026

THE KITCHEN PROJECT

Auckland Council



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01. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BUILDING COMMUNITY WEALTH THROUGH FOOD: HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2025–2026.

A Year of Growth and Evolution

Since 2018, The Kitchen Project (TKP) has empowered early-stage food and beverage entrepreneurs across Tāmaki Makaurau as Auckland Council's food business incubator. The programme champions diversity, cultural identity, healthy food and sustainability, all underpinned by a commitment to building community wealth.

This year we delivered our largest number of cohorts to date, supporting more than 26 aspiring food entrepreneurs across five cohorts. Together, they represent another generation of businesses helping shape Auckland's diverse food landscape. Increasingly, our alumni are returning to collaborate, mentor and create new opportunities together, demonstrating that The Kitchen Project's impact continues well beyond the programme itself.

Strengthening Partnerships

Partnerships with organisations including Mission Grocer, the University of Auckland, AUT, FoodBowl and major industry events have strengthened pathways for entrepreneurs while demonstrating the power of collaboration across community, education and industry. As our entrepreneurs have grown, so too has our understanding of what they need next.

Alongside community wellbeing outcomes, we are increasingly focused on creating pathways that support sustainable business growth and economic opportunity. This thinking has inspired KaiAKL, a long-term vision for a permanent home where food innovation, entrepreneurship, education and community come together to support Auckland's future food economy.

Future Outlook

With strong partnerships, a growing alumni network and an expanding ecosystem of support, The Kitchen Project is well positioned to build on this year's momentum. Together with our mentors, partners, volunteers and wider community, we will continue to create opportunities that strengthen communities, celebrate culture and help food entrepreneurs build sustainable businesses across Tāmaki Makaurau.

8	Years operating The Kitchen Project
25	Cohorts completed TKP programme
116+	Businesses have gone through our Programme
10%	Māori / Pacific food businesses
75%	Indigenous or migrant food businesses
5	Businesses in their own premises
11	Markets across the motu
4	Outstanding Food Producer medals in 2026
1,400+	Affordable food purchases through Mission Grocer store at Whare Kai
31	Student cooking classes held for University of Auckland Total
845	Students participated in cooking classes at University of Auckland
2	Commercial kitchen spaces
16	Businesses utilising our commercial kitchens
30	Businesses using their own kitchens
4	Kai Franklin place-based events in Pukekohe total
11	Businesses catering the 2026 Lewisham Awards
5	Alumni showcased at the 2025 Auckland Food Show
4	Businesses showed at World of Culture
2	Businesses recognised as 2026 Iconic Auckland Eats Top 100


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02. OUR PURPOSE IN ACTION

THE KITCHEN PROJECT IS EVOLVING ALONGSIDE ITS ENTREPRENEURS, CREATING STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS AND NEW PATHWAYS FOR AUCKLAND'S FOOD FUTURE.

Growing Food Businesses, Strengthening Communities

Over the past year, The Kitchen Project has continued to nurture food entrepreneurs, strengthen communities and create pathways into business through food. Alongside this work, something else has become increasingly clear: as our entrepreneurs have grown, so too has The Kitchen Project.

In the past year alone, The Kitchen Project delivered five cohorts and supported more than 26 aspiring food entrepreneurs, the largest number of cohorts delivered in a single year since the programme began. Together, they represent another generation of businesses helping shape Auckland's diverse and vibrant food landscape.

From Programme to Ecosystem

What began as a programme supporting people to turn food ideas into businesses has evolved into a connected ecosystem of entrepreneurs, alumni, mentors, partners and supporters.

Increasingly, our graduates are returning not because they need another programme, but because they value the relationships, advice and community that continue long after their cohort has finished.

Over the years, The Kitchen Project has proven that when people are given the right support, they don't simply build food businesses; they build confidence, lasting relationships and opportunities that continue to grow long after the programme ends.

Evolving Our Role

As our entrepreneurs have matured, it has become increasingly clear that The Kitchen Project must evolve alongside them. Many of the businesses we supported in their earliest stages are now seeking opportunities to grow, employ staff, access new markets and contribute to Auckland's food economy. Their journey has naturally prompted us to think differently about our own role and how we can continue supporting them beyond the start-up phase.

While we remain deeply committed to the community wellbeing outcomes that have shaped The Kitchen Project since its inception, we also recognise that many of our entrepreneurs are ready for their next stage of growth. Their aspirations increasingly align with Auckland's wider economic development goals, creating opportunities for employment, innovation, local procurement and thriving neighbourhood economies.

This is not a change in direction, but a natural evolution of our purpose. We will continue delivering community-focused programmes, nurturing emerging entrepreneurs and working alongside our Learning Quarter partners.

At the same time, we are strengthening the pathways, partnerships and industry connections that help graduates build sustainable businesses and realise their long-term potential.

This evolution has also reinforced the importance of listening. Rather than assuming we know what entrepreneurs need, we are creating opportunities for industry, education and government to hear directly from the people building food businesses every day.

By bringing these voices together, we are helping shape a more connected and responsive food ecosystem for Tāmaki Makaurau.

Strengthening Partnerships

Throughout the year, this approach has been reflected in a growing number of partnerships. From the Mission Grocer collaboration at the Whare Kai store, to practical cooking programmes with the

University of Auckland, collaborations with AUT students on branding and design, and new opportunities created through events such as TRENZ and the Lewisham Awards, we have continued to bring together organisations that might not otherwise have worked together.

These partnerships demonstrate that meaningful outcomes are achieved when education, industry, community and entrepreneurship intersect.

Connecting Entrepreneurs with Industry

The same collaborative approach has also shaped conversations with industry partners about what comes next for food entrepreneurs. This year, The Kitchen Project began working alongside The FoodBowl to bring emerging food entrepreneurs and industry experts together in conversation. By sharing perspectives and experiences, both organisations are exploring how specialist facilities, technical expertise and practical support can become more accessible to early-stage food businesses.

These early discussions are already laying the foundations for new partnerships and pilot initiatives that will help entrepreneurs navigate the journey from start-up to sustainable growth, strengthening the pathways between emerging food businesses and industry.

Redefining Success

Perhaps the greatest lesson of the past year has been that success cannot be measured by turnover alone. While commercial growth remains an important aspiration for many entrepreneurs, success also looks like confidence replacing uncertainty, family recipes becoming sustainable livelihoods, cultural traditions finding new audiences, local employment being created, and businesses that strengthen the communities they serve.

For The Kitchen Project, these outcomes are just as important as financial performance. They reflect the programme's commitment to creating opportunities that are meaningful, sustainable and accessible, recognising that every entrepreneur's definition of success is different and that each journey contributes to a stronger, more vibrant food ecosystem for Tāmaki Makaurau.

A Foundation for the Future

As The Kitchen Project enters its next phase, we acknowledge the people and partnerships that have helped make this journey possible.

Over the past four years, Auckland Council's Community Wellbeing team has provided the trust, encouragement and support that has enabled The Kitchen Project to grow and evolve. Their belief in the programme has given us the confidence to test new ideas, build meaningful partnerships and pursue opportunities that extend well beyond traditional business support. That willingness to back innovation has been instrumental in shaping The Kitchen Project into what it is today.

We are particularly grateful to Echo Janman, whose leadership, encouragement and advocacy have championed The Kitchen Project from its early stages. Her willingness to back new ideas and give the team the confidence to innovate has played a significant role in shaping what the programme has become today.

We also acknowledge Jacqui Yip, Ben Maw, our mentors, partners and the many organisations who continue to walk alongside us. Together, they have helped create the foundations for the next chapter of The Kitchen Project.

Those foundations and insights have helped shape our thinking about what comes next.

KaiAKL - A Forward Thinking Initiative

As we look to the future, one concept is beginning to crystallise: KaiAKL, a Ministry of Food, for Tāmaki Makaurau that establishes a central, purpose-built facility.

The partnerships, collaborations and new ways of working highlighted throughout this report have reinforced a simple idea: food entrepreneurs need more than a programme to succeed. They need ongoing pathways, affordable infrastructure, trusted relationships and opportunities to continue growing long after their first business plan has been written.

As those businesses continue to mature, so too does our thinking about what they need next. KaiAKL is a long-term vision for a permanent home where food innovation, entrepreneurship, education, culture and community come together. More than



simply another business incubator, KaiAKL seeks to bridge the gap between starting a food business and building a sustainable one by creating an ecosystem where entrepreneurs can learn, launch, test, connect and scale.

KaiAKL is about more than providing physical infrastructure. It recognises that entrepreneurs continue to need guidance, trusted relationships and opportunities to learn long after launching their business. By bringing together industry, education, community and enterprise in one place, the concept creates an environment where entrepreneurs can continue to grow, collaborate and build confidence at every stage of their journey.

This future-focused concept envisions a shared home where food innovation, entrepreneurship, education, culture and community come together under one roof. As the next evolution of The Kitchen Project, KaiAKL aligns with Auckland Council's commitment to inclusive economic development, community wealth building, wellbeing and climate resilience. It imagines a vibrant hub where food



entrepreneurs can learn, launch, test, connect and scale, bringing together education, enterprise and experience in one place.

As a critical piece of infrastructure, KaiAKL could serve as a physical entry point into Aotearoa's food innovation system, supporting entrepreneurs from idea to market, and showcasing New Zealand's food story of sustainability, whakapapa, and Indigenous innovation to the world. Building on the proven success of The Kitchen Project and responding to the growing demand for a forward-focused, inclusive solution for food entrepreneurs and innovation, the facility would bring together:

- **Shared Commercial Kitchens:** Affordable, professional kitchen space for early-stage food producers.
- **Food Embassy:** A hands-on learning space for aspiring chefs and home cooks, connecting community members with local producers and trade partners through cooking classes, demonstrations, and pathways into domestic markets and retail.

- **Photography Storytelling and Content Studio:** A dedicated suite to help businesses create visual marketing, ecommerce content, and storytelling assets.
- **Food and Beverage Lab:** A collaborative innovation centre for recipe development, packaging, testing and food tech.
- **Event and Meeting Venues:** Spaces for community workshops, industry networking, launches, celebrations and food award programmes.

KaiAKL would provide infrastructure under one roof, centred on cultural identity, relational support, circular economy practices, and local resilience in the business of food. It would act as both a springboard and safety net, accelerating ventures while making space for experimentation, learning and community. It would create opportunities to connect people, culture, commerce and innovation through food and aligns with Auckland Council's strategic goals for a regenerative, inclusive, and community-focused economy.

Why Now?

Food is increasingly recognised as a powerful lever for economic recovery and growth, tourism and cultural identity, health, and climate action.

With The Kitchen Project now well-established across Auckland, and our Agency delivering special projects such as the Whare Kai Pop-Up Store and the Kai Franklin place-based initiative, we are well-positioned to explore and advance this opportunity. Our strong partnerships and embedded role within Auckland Council provide a solid foundation to shape what comes next.

KaiAKL would allow us to scale what's already working and respond to growing demand with a fit-for-purpose solution that is anchored in place and driven by values.

The timing is right. Food is increasingly recognised as a powerful driver of economic development, tourism, cultural identity, health and climate resilience, creating a unique opportunity to build on the momentum The Kitchen Project has already established. It also builds on proven success and responds to growing demand with a forward-focused, inclusive solution.

- **Food entrepreneurship is accelerating across Auckland**, particularly among Māori, Pacific, and migrant communities. Many are seeking ways to formalise and grow their ventures, but face barriers to infrastructure, compliance, and market access. KaiAKL offers the supportive environment and facilities to help them thrive.
- **Local food systems are increasingly seen as essential to resilience.** In a climate-conscious and post-COVID era, communities need access to sustainable, low-waste food production and distribution models. KaiAKL supports these priorities through shared kitchens, food rescue partnerships, and circular economy thinking.
- **There is strong demand for culturally relevant business support and enterprise pathways.** Traditional business incubators often overlook the unique values, needs, and aspirations of diverse food entrepreneurs. KaiAKL is designed to be inclusive, relational, and values-led, rooted in manaakitanga and celebrating identity through kai.
- **Entrepreneurs need more than inspiration to succeed.** They need affordable facilities, practical support, trusted networks and industry connections that help turn opportunity into sustainable businesses.
- **The Kitchen Project has proven the model works,** now its the time to scale. With more than 116 food businesses supported to date, successful partnerships emerging across education, industry and community, and entrepreneurs increasingly seeking their next stage of growth, KaiAKL builds on a tested foundation to deliver a permanent, fit-for-purpose home.
- **Auckland's hospitality and tourism economy is ready for bold, place-based food experiences.** From food tourism to cultural events, people want authentic connections to place through what they eat. KaiAKL can offer hands-on learning, food innovation and development facilities to support the city's wider hospitality experiences shaped by the people of Tāmaki Makaurau.

- **The Kitchen Project has proven the model works,** now it's time to scale. With over 116 food businesses supported to date, and successful outcomes across multiple locations, KaiAKL builds on a tested foundation to deliver a permanent, fit-for-purpose home.
- **Youth need pathways to employment and creative careers**, food is a powerful entry point and KaiAKL can be a vehicle to create a pipeline of new food entrepreneurs and experiences nurturing and supporting talent that have a passion for food.
- **Visitors and locals alike are hungry for authentic and vibrant food experiences** that celebrate Auckland's cultural diversity.
- **Strategically, this aligns with Auckland's leadership agenda.** The city is positioning itself as a regional leader in innovation, sustainability, and inclusive growth. KaiAKL complements these goals by enabling regenerative economic development grounded in food, identity and local community.

Collaboration and Partnership Potential

We envisage that KaiAKL is not a standalone initiative, but a collaborative ecosystem, a shared platform where local government, iwi, academia, enterprise and community intersect. Its strength lies in the partnerships it fosters, unlocking innovation, collaboration and new revenue opportunities across Auckland's food economy.

Beyond individual partnerships, KaiAKL also presents a broader opportunity to support national goals in food innovation, storytelling, and economic development. KaiAKL could become a nationally significant initiative, one that brings local and central Government together to leverage Auckland's strengths for the benefit of all Aotearoa. There is the potential to act as a destination and hub for people to experience the best of New Zealand's agrifood identity, much like Denmark's Food Nation.

A Path Forward

In the months ahead, we look to explore interest with stakeholders and identify partners to help shape the vision's potential. This would need to involve collaborative consultation, site feasibility assessments, and prototyping components of the KaiAKL concept through our Agency. These early steps will ensure the kaupapa aligns with Auckland Council strategies and long-term investment plans, while remaining responsive to the real needs of communities across the region.

KaiAKL has the potential to become a catalytic infrastructure project – one that embeds food enterprise, education, circular economy, and cultural storytelling in one place.

With the right support, it could future proof Auckland's food resilience and offer a dynamic environment where youth, entrepreneurs, growers, researchers and creatives come together to solve real-world challenges. It is not just a space to cook or trade, but a living example of what inclusive, community-led innovation can look like in action.

In many ways, KaiAKL aspires to be a food-focused equivalent of GridAKL, fostering collaboration, innovation and enterprise.

As we seek to co-design and fund this initiative, TKP remains focused on shared outcomes: vibrant communities, thriving local economies, and a sustainable food system that truly reflects Auckland's diverse identity.

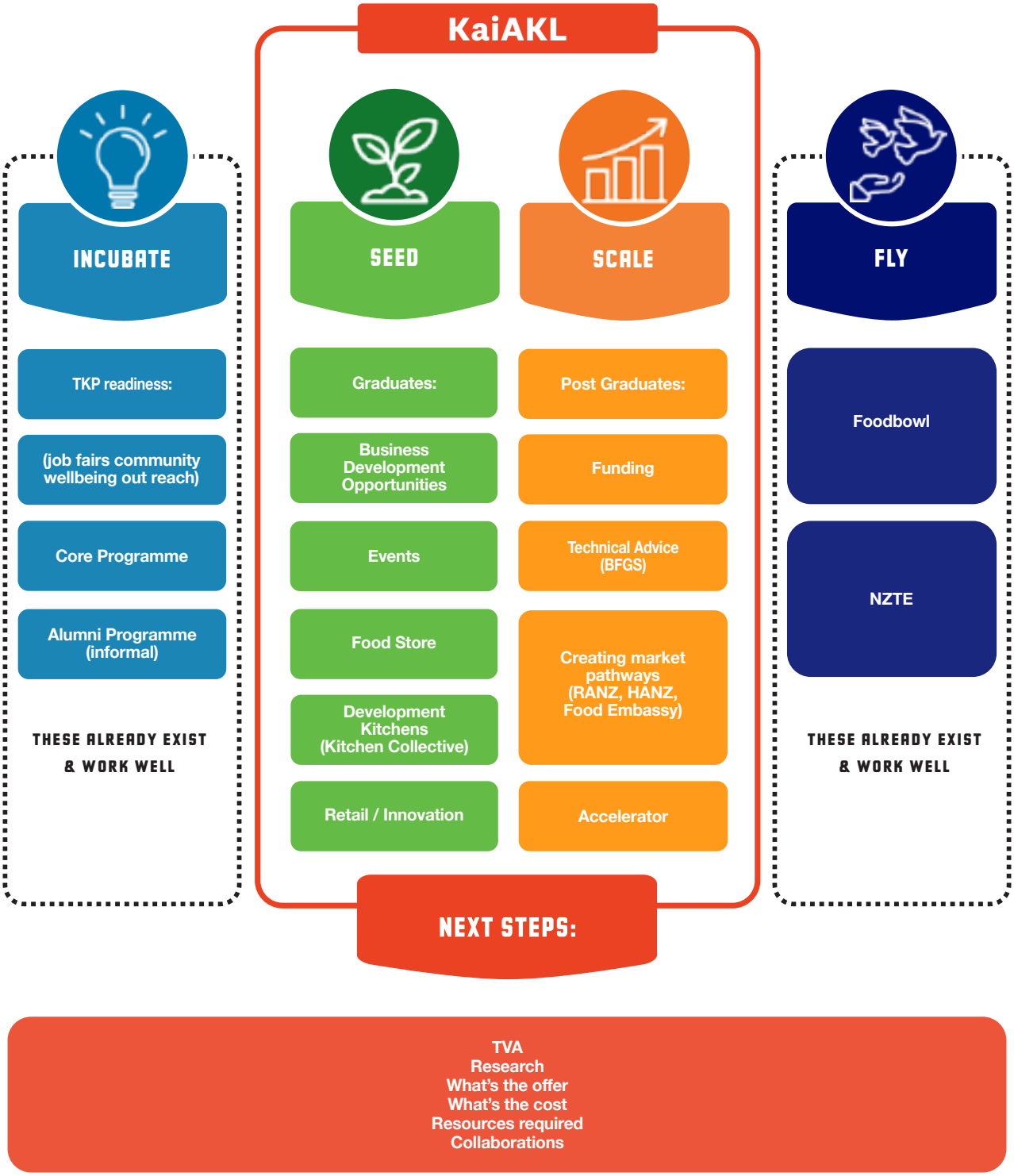
TKP is committed to helping lead this conversation. We know that meaningful change comes from collective effort, and we welcome leaders, change-makers, investors and community champions to join us in shaping a future where food plays a central role in wellbeing, resilience and opportunity.

The following model brings together the vision for KaiAKL, illustrating how a connected ecosystem of partners, shared infrastructure and collaborative programmes could transform Auckland's food enterprise landscape.

By bridging the current gap between business incubation and commercial growth, it demonstrates how the "missing middle" can be filled through coordinated partnerships, education, innovation and production, creating a seamless pathway for entrepreneurs while generating lasting economic, social and cultural value for Tāmaki Makaurau.

BRIDGING THE GAP:
HOW KAIAKL COMPLETES THE FOOD ENTERPRISE PATHWAY

This diagram highlights the missing middle in Auckland's food enterprise ecosystem. KaiAKL is designed to bridge this gap, providing the infrastructure, support, and pathways entrepreneurs need to move confidently from seed stage to scale.

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03. OUR COHORTS

CELEBRATING THE ENTREPRENEURS SHAPING THE FUTURE OF FOOD IN AUCKLAND.

A New Generation of Food Entrepreneurs

Over the past 12 months, The Kitchen Project welcomed five new cohorts of aspiring food entrepreneurs from across Tāmaki Makaurau, continuing to support people with the passion, creativity and determination to turn great food ideas into sustainable businesses. From Central Auckland to Franklin, each cohort brought together founders at different stages of their journey, united by a shared ambition to build something meaningful through food.

Together, the 26 businesses represented this year reflect the incredible diversity, talent and entrepreneurial spirit that continues to shape Auckland's food landscape. Their ideas span artisan desserts, handcrafted chocolates, boutique baking, Indonesian and Mexican street food, Brazilian home-style cooking, South African biltong, Filipino pantry staples, Malaysian cuisine, Cook Islands baking mixes, specialty bagels, premium pasta, wellness products and much more. Collectively, they showcase how Auckland's rich cultural diversity continues to inspire innovation, strengthen local food culture and create new opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Building Businesses with Purpose

While every entrepreneur arrives with a different idea, many share a common motivation. They are creating businesses that celebrate culture, preserve family traditions, support local producers, introduce new cuisines to New Zealand, or simply bring people together through great food. For many, joining The Kitchen Project marked the first step in transforming a family recipe into a commercial product.

Food is deeply personal. It carries family history, cultural identity and memories that have often been passed down through generations. The Kitchen Project provides a pathway to transform these stories into sustainable businesses, helping entrepreneurs preserve traditions while sharing them with new audiences. In doing so, they are not only creating livelihoods for themselves, but enriching Auckland's diverse food landscape.

Celebrating Culture Through Food

This year's cohorts showcased the remarkable breadth of cultures that make up Auckland's food community. Entrepreneurs introduced everything from Indonesian street food with Nusa and Guadalajara-inspired tacos from Chackal, to South African biltong from Chilli & Chutney, Cook Islands baking mixes from Missy Lala and Filipino pantry favourites from Fili Pinoy Pantry. Each business brings with it not only distinctive flavours, but also the stories, traditions and communities that inspired them. This year's businesses demonstrate that culture and entrepreneurship go hand in hand. From traditional family recipes and regional specialities to contemporary interpretations of global cuisines, participants are creating businesses that preserve cultural traditions while introducing new flavours and experiences to communities across Tāmaki Makaurau.

Turning Passion into Sustainable Businesses

Many participants joined The Kitchen Project with years of culinary experience or a well-loved family recipe, but were looking to strengthen the business foundations needed for long-term success. Whether refining boutique dessert brands like Pastels and The Chocolate Martini, developing premium food products such as Ardargie Foods and Harlston Foods, or launching innovative concepts including Pasta Purists and Bite Me Bagels, entrepreneurs gained practical tools to help transform passion into sustainable businesses.

Across every cohort, participants developed greater confidence in areas such as food safety, pricing, branding, compliance, marketing and business planning, while benefiting from one-on-one mentoring and the support of a collaborative community of fellow entrepreneurs.

“The Kitchen Project gave us the confidence to turn our idea into a business. Every workshop, every mentor and every challenge helped us grow, and we're excited to continue the journey together.”

Safril Angga & Muhammad Fakhrul, Nusa

More Than Business Training

The Kitchen Project continues to provide far more than practical business advice. Participants consistently describe the programme as a place where they gain confidence, build lasting relationships and become part of a supportive network that extends well beyond graduation.

That sense of connection continues after each cohort finishes. Alumni regularly collaborate on catering events, markets and product showcases, share advice and supplier contacts, recommend opportunities to one another and celebrate each other's successes. As the alumni community grows, so too does a culture of generosity, encouragement and shared learning that strengthens Auckland's wider food ecosystem.

The programme is also seeing an increasing number of graduates returning to mentor future cohorts. Their willingness to share honest experiences, practical lessons and business insights helps inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs while demonstrating what can be achieved through perseverance, collaboration and community support.

"Running a business can be quite isolating, so having a network of people who are going through the same challenges is invaluable. The Kitchen Project gave me the confidence I needed to get started, and now it's incredibly rewarding to come back and support the next generation of entrepreneurs."

Phillipa Malpas, Founder, Little Pips and TKP Mentor

These returning alumni also reinforce one of The Kitchen Project's greatest strengths: the programme doesn't end at graduation. Instead, it continues to grow through the relationships, knowledge and generosity shared across the alumni network.

A Growing Community

With each new cohort, The Kitchen Project's alumni community continues to grow stronger. Today's participants become tomorrow's collaborators, mentors, suppliers and champions, creating a network that extends well beyond individual businesses. Together, they are helping build a resilient, connected and culturally rich food ecosystem that reflects the diversity, creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of Tāmaki Makaurau.

Meet Our Newest Food Entrepreneurs

Central Cohort 21

Jasmin George – *Missy Lala*
Rupa Walan – *Lassi Lady*
Pooja Shankar – *Pastels*
Nataly Martini – *The Chocolate Martini*

Central Cohort 22

Paul & Tanya Horsford – *Chilli & Chutney Biltong*
Gemma Gibbons – *Smoking Cheroot*
Devina Ramlu – *Nae Nae's Kitchen*
Isabela Camela – *Quintal*
Mikial Braithewait – *Trinidad Chow*
Safril Angga and Muhammad Fakhrul – *Nusa*

Pukekohe Cohort 23

Sophia Reyes – *Sans Rival*
Imee Rafael – *Fili Pinoy Pantry*
Charlotte Schlichting – *Golden Spatz*
Mario Campa – *Bite Me Bagels*
Holly Vu – *Mrs Vu's Kitchen*
Ginni Ardargie – *Ardargie Foods*

Central Cohort 24

Jessica Battern – *Zavo*
Alfredo Cortez – *Chackal*
Abby Hazreem – *Malay Tiffin Kitchen*
Willow Yang – *The Sixth Chef Willow*
Mario Vincent – *Silly Chilly*
Jack Skelton – *Pasta Purists*

Central Cohort 25

Stephanie & Jack Zaitseva – *Berry Me*
Mitchel Buckland – *The Grand Meatball*
Ashten Macdonald – *Harlston Foods Ltd*
Journee James – *Island Holistics*

Looking to the Future

Across every cohort, entrepreneurs shared ambitious visions for the future. Some aspire to see their products stocked in supermarkets across New Zealand, while others are working towards opening cafés, expanding into multiple locations, growing export opportunities or becoming recognised brands in their own right.

While every journey is different, they are united by a shared determination to celebrate culture, create opportunity and contribute to Auckland's vibrant food economy.




GOURMET








DONUT
BAKING MIX






























little PIPS

04. TKP ALUMNI: PHILLIPA (PIP) MALPAS

OWNER OF LITTLE PIPS.

From Medical Ethics to Market Shelves

If someone had told Phillipa Malpas, known as Pip, ten years ago that she would one day be running an award-winning food business stocked in premium retailers across New Zealand, she would have struggled to believe it.

For much of her professional life, Pip worked at the University of Auckland Medical School, eventually becoming an Associate Professor of Medical Ethics. Her work centred on teaching future doctors, overseeing medical ethics education and contributing to the University's medical humanities programme. Food entrepreneurship was never part of the plan. Yet today, Little Pips syrups can be found in Farro stores, New World supermarkets, Moore Wilson's in Wellington, specialty retailers, cafés and delis across New Zealand.



Built on a commitment to using natural ingredients and showcasing fruit grown in New Zealand to support local growers, the business has won multiple industry awards, built a loyal customer following and continues to grow steadily.

The journey from university lecturer to food entrepreneur began with a simple family recipe, a chance conversation and a willingness to take a leap into the unknown.

A Family Recipe with History

The story of Little Pips begins decades before the business itself. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Pip remembers her mother making fresh lemon syrup at home.

Mixed with sparkling water, it became a family favourite. "I continued making it for my own family and for my son when he was young," Pip says. "It was quite tart and crisp, and we always loved it."



When she left the University of Auckland in 2022, Pip knew it was time for a new chapter, though she wasn't yet sure what that would look like.

"I left knowing that chapter of my life had really come to an end, but not being clear about what I wanted to do going forward." She found herself reflecting on what mattered and considering new possibilities. One day, while volunteering at a café on Karangahape Road, a chef asked a simple question about her future plans. "I said, 'I've got this crazy idea, but I don't know what to do with it.'"

The chef's response changed everything. "He said, 'I know just the person you need to speak to.'" That person was Connie Clarkson, Manager at The Kitchen Project.

Learning a Completely New World

Pip joined The Kitchen Project's August 2022 cohort with little knowledge of what it would take to build a food business. "I knew absolutely nothing about starting a food business," she says.

What she did have was a product she believed in. By then, she had already refined several syrup recipes, including what would become Little Pips' signature Lemon flavour. She arrived at The Kitchen Project with recipes, samples and an idea, but little understanding of the systems, regulations and commercial realities required to bring a food product to market.

"The Kitchen Project was fantastic because they knew the pathway to start. They helped me think about what problem I was trying to solve, who my customers were, what made my product different and what I wanted the brand to stand for."

— Pip Malpas, founder of Little Pips and food entrepreneur

The programme introduced Pip to everything from food safety requirements and verification processes through to insurance, branding, pricing and product development. "There is so much to understand, especially when you don't have a background in food or beverages."

One of the most valuable lessons came from understanding that building a business is rarely a straight line.

"I remember Connie saying that you'll make mistakes along the way. At the time I thought I'd just work hard enough not to make mistakes. But actually, many of the challenges that come up are things completely outside your control."

Starting Small and Learning Fast

Little Pips officially launched in April 2023 at the Titirangi Market with three flavours: Lemon, Black Doris Plum, and Strawberry & Rhubarb. Before selling a single bottle, Pip spent months gathering feedback from potential customers.

One of her earliest market appearances involved offering free tastings and collecting survey responses rather than making sales. "That exercise was fantastic. People had no obligation to buy anything. It gave me a huge amount of feedback and changed a few things about how we went forward."

Markets became an important part of the Little Pips story. Rather than trying to attend every possible event, Pip focused on showing up consistently in her local community.

"I made a commitment to Titirangi because it's where I live and where my customers are. People know you're going to be there." Over time, familiar faces became regular customers. "You get the regulars who come every month and buy your products. That's fantastic."

Since launch, the range has continued to evolve, with Pip introducing a refreshing Lime flavour in June 2025, expanding the offering while staying true to the brand's signature balance of tartness and natural flavour.

The Reality Behind the Product

While customers see a bottle on a shelf, Pip knows how much work sits behind every label. Today, production takes place at The FoodBowl, New Zealand's food innovation facility, where she manufactures Little Pips products using commercial equipment.

The learning curve has been steep. There have been production runs where labels failed, suppliers ran short of ingredients, and unexpected challenges threatened to derail carefully planned schedules.One memorable moment came when Pip realised at the end of a production day that she had miscalculated how much sugar was required for the following day's manufacturing run.

"I had to find a new supplier overnight. The production run had to happen. It's like a plane taking off. If you're not on it, you've missed it."

Moving from small batches to runs of 5,000 bottles brought a new kind of challenge. "You suddenly realise it's not just about making the product," Pip says. "You need somewhere to put it all."

What had once been manageable at a small scale quickly became a logistical puzzle. "I remember thinking, 'Where is all of this going to go?'


little
PIPS
SODA SYRUP
BLACK DORIS
PLUM
SHAKE ME UP!
SODA SYRUP
500ml



You have to think about storage, inventory, and how you're going to move product efficiently. It's a whole different level."

Those experiences have taught resilience. Looking back, Pip laughs at how much she didn't know. "You don't know what you don't know." But that willingness to learn has become one of Little Pips' greatest strengths.

Seeing Little Pips on the Shelf

Just two months after launching, Pip sent an email to Farro. She didn't know whether anyone would respond. Within an hour she received a reply. Soon afterwards she was sitting in Farro's Grey Lynn office sharing samples.

Not long after that, an order arrived. Farro agreed to trial Little Pips products and the relationship has continued to grow ever since. "They've been amazing. They've been incredibly supportive."

Today Little Pips products are stocked across multiple Farro stores as well as Moore Wilson's, New World stores, Refill Nation and a growing number of independent retailers. Seeing the product on the shelf still hasn't lost its magic.

"It's an amazing feeling. There's just something about seeing something you've brought into the world sitting there on the shelf. I don't think I'll ever get sick of it."

— Pip Malpas, founder of Little Pips and food entrepreneur

Award Recognition

Along the way, Little Pips has received a series of industry awards, including multiple medals at the Outstanding Food Producer Awards and recognition at the New Zealand Artisan Awards. Every flavour has now received recognition, with the Black Doris Plum syrup emerging as a customer favourite too.

For Pip, the awards are valuable not simply because of the medals attached to them, but because of what they represent. "They're blind judged. The judges don't know what the product is. It's independent feedback." That feedback has directly influenced the business.

The first time Black Doris Plum was entered into competition it didn't win and received feedback for being too tart.

Rather than ignoring the comments, Pip adjusted the recipe. The following year it won gold. "The feedback was incredibly valuable."

Building More Than a Business

Running Little Pips has also changed Pip personally. After leaving a long academic career, there was a period of uncertainty about identity and purpose. “So often you define yourself through what you do.”

Building Little Pips has helped create a new chapter. “No matter what happens going forward, I did it.” Not because the journey has been easy. Far from it. But because taking the chance mattered.

“There are so many reasons not to do something. You tell yourself you’ll do it later, or when the timing is right. Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and have some faith in yourself.”

— Pip Malpas, founder of Little Pips and food entrepreneur

Advice for Future Entrepreneurs

Having completed the journey from idea to award-winning food brand, Pip now regularly shares her experience with new Kitchen Project cohorts as a mentor.

Her advice is practical: know your numbers, ask questions, seek help, build relationships, and most importantly, start.

“If you think you’ve got an idea that other people will enjoy, and you’ve got support around you, just give it a go.” Pip is realistic about the challenges but equally optimistic about the opportunities. “Most people are incredibly generous with their knowledge and experience.”

That generosity has shaped her own journey and is something she now passes on to others. “If you’ve got the opportunity to do it, have confidence in your abilities and ask for help when you need it.”

For Pip, success isn’t measured solely by awards, retail listings or sales figures. It’s measured by having the courage to try.

“If someone had told me ten years ago that this is what I’d be doing in 2026, I would have been incredulous.” She adds: “But, no matter what the future holds, I’m really happy I did it.”

Perhaps that’s the real story of Little Pips, not just having created an award-winning product, but showing that new ideas can take shape whenever you’re ready to pursue them.

A homemade family recipe syrup can grow into something people return to again and again to enjoy, whether it’s poured over ice on a summer afternoon or sipped warm on a winter evening.



Photo credits: Catherine at Studio Melo @studi_melo_nz


KITCHEN PROJECT


OUTSTANDING 2026 FOOD PRODUCER AWARDS GOLD
OUTSTANDING 2026 FOOD PRODUCER AWARDS SILVER
OUTSTANDING 2026 FOOD PRODUCER AWARDS SILVER
MUSHROOM XO SPREAD
MUSHROOM XO SPREAD


OUTSTANDING 2026 FOOD PRODUCER AWARDS SILVER
PIPC
LIME


THE KITCHEN PROJECT


THE KITCHEN PROJECT


2022
23\24
2025
2026
CRISPY FALAFEL PITA
CARMEL - ISRAELI STREET FOOD
ICONIC
AUCKLAND EATS


2026
LAKSA
IRENE DRAGON CUISINE
ICONIC
AUCKLAND EATS


THE KITCHEN PROJECT

05. RISING FOOD STARS

TKP ALUMNI CONTINUE TO SHINE ON THE NATIONAL STAGE.

Outstanding Food Producer Awards 2026

The Kitchen Project's alumni continue to demonstrate that with the right support, determination and a great product, local food businesses can achieve national recognition.

This year, alumni were recognised across two prestigious industry programmes, the Outstanding Food Producer Awards and the Iconic Auckland Eats Awards, highlighting both the quality of their products and the diversity of Auckland's thriving food community.

Mushroom Mate

Gold Medal – Forager's Mushroom Salt Garlic
Silver Medal – Mushroom XO Spread
Silver Medal – Mushroom XO Spread Mildly Spicy

One of the year's standout achievements came from Mushroom Mate, founded by TKP alumna Esperanza Reyes, who was recognised with a Gold Medal and two Silver Medals at the 2026 Outstanding Food Producer Awards. What began as a Year 8 sustainability project with her daughter has grown into a thriving urban mushroom farm in Hunua, South Auckland, producing premium mushroom products and grow-your-own kits while supporting local growers and championing sustainable food production. For Esperanza, the business is about far more than mushrooms. It is about sharing knowledge, reducing waste, supporting biodiversity and strengthening local food systems through education, innovation and community.

Little Pips

Silver Medal – Lime Soda Syrup

Fellow alumna Phillipa Malpas, founder of Little Pips, also celebrated success with a Silver Medal for her Lime Soda Syrup. Known for creating handcrafted fruit syrups using seasonal New Zealand produce, Little Pips continues to gain recognition for products that combine premium quality with simple, natural ingredients.

Top 100 Iconic Auckland Eats Recognition

The year's celebrations continued with two Kitchen Project alumni recognised in the Iconic Auckland Eats Top 100.

Carmel Israeli Street Food

Top 100 Iconic Eats Auckland – Crispy Falafel Pita

Carmel Israeli Street Food was again recognised for bringing authentic Israeli flavours to Auckland through vibrant street food inspired by family recipes and traditional cooking techniques, marking its sixth consecutive year receiving this recognition.

Irene Dragon Cuisine

Top 100 Iconic Eats Auckland – Laksa

Irene Dragon Cuisine also earned a place on the prestigious list, celebrating its much-loved Malaysian cuisine and the contribution it continues to make to Auckland's diverse dining scene.

Both businesses showcase the cultural richness and entrepreneurial talent that continue to emerge through The Kitchen Project and demonstrate how local food businesses are helping shape Auckland's identity as a vibrant food city.

Building Businesses That Last

These achievements represent more than individual awards. They reflect years of dedication, resilience and continuous learning as entrepreneurs refine their products, grow their businesses and build loyal customers.

As more alumni gain recognition through national awards, retail opportunities and industry partnerships, The Kitchen Project continues to demonstrate that investing in early-stage food entrepreneurs creates benefits that extend well beyond the programme itself, contributing to a stronger, more diverse and more connected food ecosystem for Tāmaki Makaurau while inspiring the next generation of food entrepreneurs to dream bigger.

06. FLAVOURING LOCAL FOOD MARKETS

FOOD MARKETS POWER THE RISE OF OUR ENTREPRENEURS.

Where Great Food Businesses Meet Their Community

For many entrepreneurs, the first true test of a food business isn't opening a shop, it's setting up a market stall.

Across Tāmaki Makaurau, The Kitchen Project alumni are becoming familiar faces at neighbourhood farmers' markets, twilight markets and community festivals, introducing customers to new flavours while steadily building loyal followings. From Grey Lynn and Catalina Bay to Howick, Parnell, Kumeū, Takapuna and Britomart, local markets across Auckland continue to provide an important stepping stone between developing a product and building a sustainable business.

A Launchpad for Growth

Markets remain one of the most accessible ways for entrepreneurs to test ideas, refine products and connect directly with customers.

Every conversation, tasting and sale provides immediate feedback, helping businesses build confidence while refining everything from pricing and packaging to branding and customer experience.

Over the past year, alumni, often supported by families, introduced an exciting range of new products and cuisines to Auckland's markets.

Indonesian street food from Nusa made its market debut at the Halal Collective Market, while Lassi Lady celebrated the successful launch of its handcrafted mango lassi.

Other alumni continued to build strong market followings, including Mushroom Mate, Dolly Mumma, Ariana Foods, Focca, Red Hot Kiwi, Grow-nola and Nae Nae's Kitchen, with many now regular fixtures across Auckland's weekend markets.

Building Community Wealth

Markets represent far more than a place to sell food. They create opportunities for entrepreneurs to share their culture, tell their stories and build meaningful relationships with customers, while bringing life and vibrancy to local neighbourhoods.

For many businesses, the market stall is also the first step towards something much bigger. Over time, successful market traders have gone on to secure retail stockists, open permanent premises, cater major events and receive national recognition through industry awards. Markets provide an accessible pathway for entrepreneurs to grow at their own pace while keeping value circulating within their local communities.

“Food markets are where entrepreneurs build confidence, test ideas and become part of the communities they serve. Every market creates opportunities not only for individual businesses to grow, but for neighbourhoods to experience new cultures, support local enterprise and keep community wealth circulating locally.”

Connie Clarkson, Manager, The Kitchen Project

More Than a Market Stall

As The Kitchen Project's alumni network continues to grow, so too does its presence across Auckland's markets.

Increasingly, graduates can be found trading alongside one another, sharing knowledge, recommending opportunities and supporting each other's success.

These markets have become more than places of commerce. They are spaces where entrepreneurship, culture and community come together, helping transform great food ideas into thriving businesses while strengthening the rich and diverse food landscape of Tāmaki Makaurau.










COOKIES
CREAM


Lassi
Lady


FOLLOW


Nusa
INDONESIAN STREET FOOD




basically buns
basically buns
basically buns

07. TKP ALUMNI SHOWCASE THEIR KAI

ELEVEN FOOD BUSINESSES ON AUCKLAND'S BIGGEST HOSPITALITY STAGE.

A Celebration of Auckland Hospitality

For 24 years, the Lewisham Awards have celebrated the people, places and businesses shaping Auckland's hospitality industry.

Often described as the "Oscars of Auckland hospitality", the awards recognise excellence across the city's restaurants, cafés, bars, producers and hospitality venues, with winners nominated and judged by their hospitality industry peers.

More than a celebration of individual achievement, the Lewisham Awards shine a spotlight on the creativity, resilience and innovation that continue to define Tāmaki Makaurau's vibrant food scene.

A Milestone for The Kitchen Project

For The Kitchen Project, the 2026 awards marked a milestone of a different kind. Having supported the event over several years with a small number of alumni food businesses, this year The Kitchen Project was entrusted to deliver the entire food experience.

The decision reflected the confidence the Lewisham Awards Committee had developed in The Kitchen Project's entrepreneurs and their ability to deliver at scale. Eleven Kitchen Project alumni food businesses came together to transform Shed 10 on Auckland's waterfront into a vibrant international night market.

A Night Market Experience

The result was unlike a traditional awards dinner. Instead of taking their seats for a plated meal, more than 600 hospitality professionals wandered between food stalls, sampling flavours from around the world, chatting with the entrepreneurs behind each dish and sharing recommendations with colleagues. Live music, DJs, activations and a dance floor created a festival atmosphere that encouraged guests to explore, connect and celebrate long after the awards presentation had concluded.

One guest perfectly captured the surprise many people felt on arriving.

“We walked in and weren't sure if we were in the right place because it looked like a night market. Then they told us, ‘No, this is the event.’ And I thought, ‘This is amazing.’”

That sense of discovery carried throughout the evening.

A Global Culinary Showcase

Together, eleven Kitchen Project alumni showcased the diversity of Auckland's food culture, serving dishes inspired by Vietnam, Hong Kong, Israel, Fiji, Samoa, India, Goa, Indonesia, Mexico, Malaysia and New Zealand flavours reflecting Aotearoa's own rich culinary landscape.

Each stall represented not only a food business, but an entrepreneur building a livelihood through The Kitchen Project and sharing their culture through food.

Guests were free to choose their own culinary journey, moving from Vietnamese pho and Hong Kong dumplings to crispy Israeli falafel pitas, Samoan panipopo, Fijian pineapple pie cake, handcrafted Indian macarons, Mexican-inspired crispy chicken tacos, Indonesian satay, Goan chicken curry and vibrant Malaysian cuisine.

The format encouraged people to try something new, compare favourites with friends and discover food businesses they may never have encountered otherwise.

“I've just gone around all the market stalls and had a look at all the different food and there's just so much choice. I loved it.”

Another guest added:

“I don't think I've ever tried any of this food before. Thank goodness for this event.”


CARAMEL


Comfort Bowl



More Than a Menu

Behind every dish was a food entrepreneur with a unique story.

For many of the businesses, the Lewisham Awards represented far more than a catering event. It was an opportunity to showcase years of hard work to Auckland's hospitality leaders, with many presenting their food to industry professionals on one of the city's biggest hospitality stages for the first time.

Together, the eleven alumni represented businesses at different stages of their journey. Some were already gaining recognition through national food awards and retail opportunities, while others were building loyal followings through markets, catering and pop-up events. Collectively, they demonstrated not only the quality of Auckland's emerging food businesses, but also the strength of The Kitchen Project's growing alumni community.

While guests quickly developed their favourites, one thing remained consistent throughout the evening: every stall attracted enthusiastic supporters. Some guests returned for second helpings, while others discovered cuisines they had never tried before, reflecting the curiosity and sense of discovery that the night market experience inspired.

Food That Stole the Show

The quality of the food quickly became a talking point throughout the evening.

“The pineapple cake was so good. It tasted like something really expensive.”

Several stalls attracted queues as guests returned for second or third helpings or recommended dishes to others.

“The chicken satay sticks were outstanding. Some of the best I've ever tried. I lined up twice. We literally caught the last bit of it because everyone was lined up, but my goodness, it was worth it.”

Other guests praised the diversity of flavours on offer.

“The falafel was so good and crunchy. Absolutely loved it.”

“I've had macarons in New York and Sydney, and these were by far the most delicious macarons I've ever tried.”

An Atmosphere to Remember

While the food received glowing praise, many guests commented that it was the atmosphere that made the evening memorable.

“We loved getting amongst it all. It makes for a sociable night. We're all amongst each other, having a chat, enjoying the night and the variety of different food.”

Unlike a traditional seated awards dinner, the market-style format encouraged movement, conversation and interaction between guests, entrepreneurs and hospitality professionals.

It created opportunities for people to connect naturally while exploring the different cuisines on offer.

“There was so much energy. I loved the vibe.”

The People Behind the Food

The entrepreneurs themselves became part of the experience.

Guests appreciated meeting the people behind the food, chatting with stallholders and learning about their businesses as they sampled dishes from around the room.

“The staff that were serving it made it the best. Honestly, the staff were amazing. The guys behind the counter were so much fun. They were handing out falafels while we were waiting in line.”

More Than a Catering Opportunity

For many of The Kitchen Project's alumni, the evening represented much more than a catering opportunity. It provided paid work, valuable exposure to Auckland's industry leaders and the chance to showcase their businesses on one of hospitality's biggest stages.

It also demonstrated what is possible when a collective of food entrepreneurs come together to deliver an experience that is both commercially successful and culturally rich.

Perhaps the strongest endorsement came from the audience itself. The Lewisham Awards are attended by chefs, restaurateurs, bartenders, venue owners, suppliers and hospitality professionals who understand great food and memorable experiences better than most.

As one guest summed it up:

“Hospo knows hospo. It just works.”

It was a simple observation, but one that spoke volumes.

A Lasting Impact

The 2026 Lewisham Awards demonstrated how food can do more than nourish guests. It can spark conversations, celebrate cultures, create opportunities for entrepreneurs and transform an awards dinner into an experience people remember long after the final award has been presented.

“Seeing eleven alumni businesses standing shoulder to shoulder on one of Auckland's biggest hospitality stages was incredibly special. It showed not only how far each entrepreneur has come, but what becomes possible when we create opportunities for people to grow together.”

Connie Clarkson, Manager, The Kitchen Project

For The Kitchen Project, the evening represented more than another successful event. It demonstrated how a growing network of alumni can come together to deliver an exceptional hospitality experience at scale.

Collectively, the eleven businesses showed that The Kitchen Project is no longer simply supporting individual food entrepreneurs; it is cultivating a community of businesses capable of delivering world-class food experiences on Auckland's biggest hospitality stage.


Nusa
INDONESIAN STREET FOOD
THE KITCHEN PROJECT


THE KITCHEN PROJECT


















PHỞ YÊN







LEWISHAM FOUNDATION LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD.

A Well-Deserved Recognition for a Lifetime of Service

While The Kitchen Project's alumni were busy serving hundreds of guests throughout the evening, the 2026 Lewisham Awards also brought a special moment of recognition for one of the programme's own. The Kitchen Project Manager Connie Clarkson was presented with a Lewisham Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, recognising more than 24 years of voluntary service to the Lewisham Awards and Auckland's hospitality community. She received the honour alongside fellow long-serving committee members David Meagher and Chris Upton, while founding committee member Clive Weston was recognised as he stepped down after helping establish the awards in 2002.



The awards acknowledged the recipients' decades of gifted service and their shared commitment to celebrating excellence across Auckland's hospitality industry.

Championing Auckland Hospitality

For more than two decades, Connie has helped shape one of Auckland's most respected hospitality institutions. Since the Lewisham Awards began in 2002, she has worked alongside fellow committee members to grow the awards into the celebration they are today, recognising excellence, nurturing emerging talent and strengthening Auckland's hospitality community.

Connie also served as Chair of the Lewisham Awards for nine years, helping guide the programme through periods of growth and change while ensuring it remained relevant to an industry that continues to evolve.

Like every member of the committee, her contribution has always been entirely voluntary, driven by a genuine belief that hospitality thrives when it celebrates and supports its own people. Accepting the award on behalf of the recipients, Connie chose to use the moment to acknowledge founding committee member Clive Weston and the vision that helped establish the awards more than two decades ago. It was a fitting reflection of her leadership style, recognising the contribution of others and the collective effort required to build opportunities for future generations.

Creating Opportunities for Others

In many ways, the philosophy behind the Lewisham Awards mirrors the work Connie has led through The Kitchen Project. Both are built on recognising potential, creating pathways for people to succeed, and celebrating the contribution individuals make to Auckland's hospitality landscape. While the Lewisham Awards celebrate established excellence, The Kitchen Project helps nurture the next generation of food entrepreneurs who will one day become the hospitality leaders of tomorrow.

Through mentoring, industry partnerships, market opportunities and business support, Connie has spent years helping emerging entrepreneurs gain the confidence, networks and experience needed to grow sustainable food businesses.

Whether supporting established hospitality businesses through the Lewisham Awards or helping new entrepreneurs build their first food venture through The Kitchen Project, her work has consistently focused on strengthening Auckland's hospitality ecosystem.

It reflects the programme's wider belief that community wealth is created not only through successful businesses, but through people who willingly invest their time, experience and relationships to create opportunities for others.

A Full-Circle Moment

The timing of the evening made the recognition especially meaningful. While Connie accepted an award recognising more than 24 years of service to Auckland hospitality, eleven Kitchen Project alumni businesses were downstairs catering for more than 600 hospitality professionals, serving dishes representing eleven different cultures from across the world.

It was a powerful demonstration of The Kitchen Project's long-term impact. The same industry Connie had spent decades supporting was now embracing a new generation of entrepreneurs whose businesses had been nurtured through the programme she leads.

The future of Auckland hospitality was not only being celebrated on stage; it was being served on plates throughout the evening.

For those who know Connie through The Kitchen Project, the moment felt particularly significant. The passion she has invested in championing Auckland's hospitality industry has also been at the heart of The Kitchen Project, creating opportunities for emerging food entrepreneurs to learn, grow, connect and contribute to Auckland's increasingly diverse food landscape.

Throughout this report, the impact of The Kitchen Project can be seen in award-winning food producers, thriving alumni businesses, food rescue initiatives, community partnerships, and entrepreneurs creating opportunities for others.

Connie's Lifetime Achievement Award serves as a reminder that none of this happens by accident. Behind every successful programme are people who quietly dedicate years to building relationships, opening doors and creating pathways so others can flourish.

Connie’s recognition was not simply a celebration of an individual achievement. It was a celebration of the values that underpin The Kitchen Project itself: generosity, collaboration, community leadership, and the belief that when people are supported to succeed, the benefits extend far beyond any one business to strengthen Auckland's entire hospitality community.

AUCKLAND FOOD SHOW 2025: FIVE ALUMNI BUSINESSES ON SHOW.

A Shared Platform at New Zealand’s Biggest Food Event

At The Auckland Food Show 2025, held at the Auckland Showgrounds from 24 to 27 July, The Kitchen Project stand gave five of our alumni founders, UmamiBee, Mushroom Mate, Little Pips, Roccoto and Smoke Shed, a shared platform at New Zealand’s biggest consumer food event.

The Auckland show drew a total attendance of 29,410. Of those visitors, 96.5% bought products at the show and 77% said they would return the following year.

Family Businesses Sharing Their Kai

For these cross-cultural, intergenerational family businesses, that meant direct access to a large audience ready to buy.

Recipes handed down through generations met new customers, and parents, children and grandparents worked side by side to share the flavours and stories behind their kai.

Standing together under The Kitchen Project banner gave each founder the visibility of a major exhibition without the cost and risk of going it alone.

It also gave them the chance to test products, gather real-time customer feedback, refine their pricing and pitch, and build connections with stockists and distributors.

Turning Show Interest into Business Growth

Founders left with sales, new contacts and the confidence to take the next step in their culinary business journey, and all five businesses continue to trade well after the show, with their family heritage still at the heart of what they create.






THE
ROJECT






THE


THE
KITCHE
















THE
Going Bananas - Filipino Ketchup
Sarsarap - Filipino
sauce
Trio Ginisa - Filipino Stir Fry Paste (The dish lifter)
203
www.umamibee.


WIN
$12.95
Banana on Fire - Hot Sauce
Ube Halaya - Purple Yam Spread
THE SMOKE S
Estd 2024
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08. IMPACT OF THE WHARE KAI STORE

BUILDING FOOD SECURITY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTION THROUGH KAI.

Tackling Food Insecurity Through Local Action

What began as a conversation between The Kitchen Project and Mission Grocer has grown into a vibrant community initiative creating opportunities for food security, connection, learning and collaboration. In October 2025, The Kitchen Project welcomed Mission Grocer to Whare Kai in Albert Park, bringing affordable, healthy food into the heart of Auckland's Learning Quarter.



Operating from the Caretaker's Cottage alongside The Kitchen Project and at Home Ground on Federal Street, the social enterprise offers $15 fruit and vegetable bags, low-cost grocery items and ready-made frozen meals, providing convenient and affordable food options for students, city workers, local residents and visitors.

The Kitchen Project and Mission Grocer share a belief that healthy food should be within reach of everyone. More than a grocery store, Mission Grocer is a social enterprise and growing food community where people can access healthy food with dignity, connect with others and feel welcome, regardless of their circumstances.

Building a Food Community

Kelly O'Hara, who leads Mission Grocer for Te Tāpui Atawhai Auckland City Mission explains:

“Our goal is to make healthy, affordable food accessible to everyone, especially fresh fruit and vegetables. We offer discounts for students and people on low incomes to help make healthy choices more affordable.

“Sometimes people worry they might be taking away from others by shopping here, but it's actually the opposite. The more people who shop with us, the more variety we can offer, the stronger the food community becomes, and the longer we can continue supporting those who need us. Every purchase helps keep the social enterprise thriving.”

A Successful First Year

The Mission Grocer initially launched as a nine-week pilot at Whare Kai for two days a week before closing over the summer break and reopening in early 2026. The response from the community quickly demonstrated the value of having accessible, affordable food available in the heart of the city.

Across its first six months of operation, the store recorded almost 1,400 transactions and welcomed an average of around 50 visitors each day it was open.

During that time, customers also purchased 29 Pay-It-Forward food bags, helping make healthy food accessible for others in the community.

“We are so grateful to Connie and The Kitchen Project Team. They have made us so welcome at the Whare Kai store and promote us wherever they go. Best flatmates ever!”

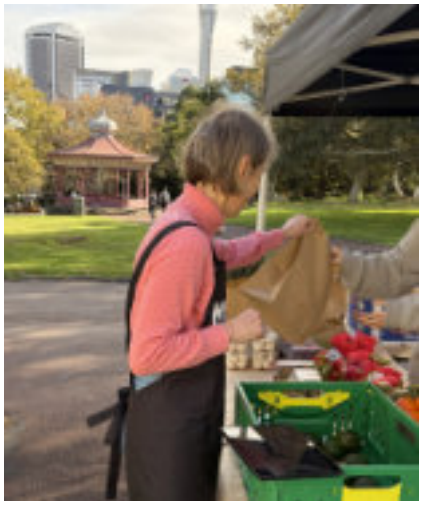
Kelly O'Hara, Te Tāpui Atawhai Auckland City Mission


EVERYONE'S WELCOME!
MISSION
$15 Bags
apples (5)
carrots (5)
silverbeet (1)
onions (3)
Bananas (5)
kūmara (3)
KIWIFruit (2)


SION
OCER
MISSION
ISSION


A LITTLE
SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE
WITH A BIG
HEART


MISSION




Vinnies Kitchen
Ready-meals
Soup $5
chicken curry $10
Bangers & Mash $10
Lasagne $12
Roast chicken $10
YUM


EVERYONE'S WELCOME!
MISSION
GROCER

Ensuring a Sustainable Model

Mission Grocer was established by Te Tāpui Atawhai Auckland City Mission as part of a wider shift from responding to food insecurity through food parcels alone towards creating longer-term food security solutions.

By providing affordable produce and everyday food essentials in central Auckland, the initiative helps make nutritious food more accessible to those who need it most. The initiative brings together funding partners, volunteers and industry expertise to help make healthy food accessible to more Aucklanders.



A key contributor has been Allan Murray from Foodtogether and MG Group (Market Gardeners), a produce co-operative representing more than 400 grower shareholders. Allan has worked closely alongside the Mission Grocer since its early development, sharing his produce industry knowledge, supplier relationships and purchasing expertise to support both the HomeGround store on Federal Street and the Whare Kai store in Albert Park. His guidance on seasonal availability, sourcing and buying strategies helps Mission Grocer secure quality fruit and vegetables at affordable prices, strengthening the sustainability of the model and supporting the goal of healthy food with dignity for all.

More Than a Shop

For Mission Grocer Project Manager Kelly O'Hara, one of the biggest surprises has been how quickly people formed a connection with the Albert Park store.

"When we came back after the summer break, people were saying, 'It's so good you're back, we missed you.' We'd only operated for nine weeks before closing for summer, but people had already become attached to it."

The store is supported by a dedicated team of staff and volunteers who help create an environment that feels welcoming and inclusive. At the heart of the Albert Park operation is Adam, whose friendly approach and genuine connection with customers have helped build a strong sense of community around the store.

Supporting Adam is a diverse volunteer team that includes retirees, professionals, engineers, web designers, university students and people looking to give back to their community.



Volunteers range from a retired judge and business professionals to students seeking ways to contribute, reflecting the broad community that has formed around the store. Together, they help create an experience where everyone is welcome and where shopping is about more than simply buying food; it is also about human connection.

Whether it's a volunteer giving their time, a student looking for affordable produce, university faculty, or a new migrant seeking conversation and community, the store has become a place where people can connect and feel they belong. "What tickles me is how excited people get about fruit and vegetables," Kelly says. "People don't always get to see fresh produce like that. They're genuinely excited. But it also shouldn’t be this way."

Paying-it Forward

At the heart of Mission Grocer is a simple but powerful belief: everyone deserves access to healthy food with dignity.

Customers can contribute through the Pay-It-Forward programme by purchasing an extra item, meal or produce bag for someone else and leaving a message of encouragement on the store's Pay-It-Forward wall. Whether it's a fruit and vegetable bag, a meal or another grocery item, these small acts of generosity help strengthen the food community that has formed around the store.



One story from the past year continues to stay with Kelly. On one occasion, after bringing surplus produce from the Federal Street store to Albert Park and not wanting it to go to waste, she offered free bags of fruit and vegetables to people passing by. One young student accepted a bag and quietly confided that they had no money left for food.

“He was almost in tears, and then I was almost in tears," Kelly recalls. "I've seen them come back half a dozen times since. That's what we're trying to achieve. We want people to know we're here. If they don't have money, they can come for food. When they do have money, they can come and shop. Maybe one day they'll even pay it forward.”

Since then, they have returned as a regular customer, a reminder that circumstances can change and that a little support at the right time can make a real difference.

For Kelly, that story captures exactly what Mission Grocer is trying to build at Whare Kai: not simply a place to buy food, but a community where people feel supported, connected and able to contribute when they can.

Partnership in Action

Together, the two organisations share a belief in the power of food to build confidence, create connections and strengthen the wellbeing of communities.

While The Kitchen Project supports food entrepreneurs and delivers learning opportunities through kai, Mission Grocer helps improve access to affordable food for people living, working and studying in the city.

"Whare Kai is becoming a place where food, learning, entrepreneurship and community come together, and we are so pleased to have Mission Grocer as our partner," says Connie Clarkson, Manager of The Kitchen Project.



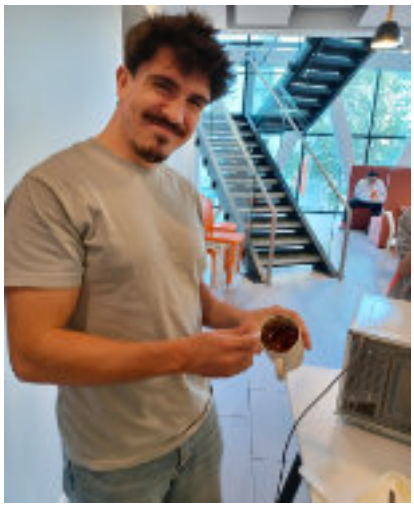
"Their presence strengthens what we are building here, creating more opportunities for people to connect, learn and grow through food. Together, we are helping shape a space where ideas can flourish, businesses can develop, and the wider community can access healthy, affordable kai."

The partnership continues to evolve, with plans for a dedicated Kitchen Project shelf within the Federal store.


THE KITCHEN PROJECT
LEARN TO COOK MEALS ON A BUDGET
- 16TH MARCH
-4TH MAY
-8TH JUNE
-20TH JULY
-10TH AUGUST
-7TH SEPTEMBER
-12TH OCTOBER
25 RESIDENTS - FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE - SIGN UP LINK TO BE SENT UP 3 DAYS PRIOR TO EVENT













The initiative will showcase products from Kitchen Project entrepreneurs, helping tell their stories and introducing customers to the diversity of Auckland's food culture. It will also create another pathway for alumni businesses to connect directly with customers and share their products with the community.

"We think about The Kitchen Project when we're in other spaces, and they think about us," says Kelly. "It's about joining people up and creating connections."

As both organisations look to the future, the collaboration demonstrates how partnerships can create outcomes that extend beyond any one programme, strengthening food security, supporting entrepreneurship and building a more connected community through kai.



Student Cooking Classes Build Confidence

One of the most impactful collaborations to emerge from Whare Kai has been the partnership between The Kitchen Project and the University of Auckland's Student Wellbeing team. The partnership grew from a shared belief that food plays an important role in both wellbeing and community connection.

Now in its third year, the programme delivers monthly hands-on cooking classes for students living in self-catered halls of residence, using Mission Grocer fruit and vegetable bags wherever possible.

Established in response to growing concerns about food insecurity among tertiary students, the classes teach practical cooking skills and affordable meal preparation while helping students build confidence in the kitchen, develop healthier eating habits, gain greater independence and strengthen connections with others.

Students are also introduced to Mission Grocer's affordable weekly produce bags and student discounts, making it easy to continue preparing healthy meals long after the class has finished.



This creates a natural pathway from learning new recipes in the classroom to confidently cooking nutritious meals at home.

During the past year, 13 cooking classes were delivered across University of Auckland halls of residence, with more than 300 student attendances.

Led by The Kitchen Project's Core Programme Coordinator and chef, Hayden Stewart, the classes focus on recipes that are healthy, affordable and realistic for busy student life.

Cooking for Real Life

Rather than teaching complex restaurant techniques, Hayden designs recipes that students can easily recreate in their own kitchens using affordable ingredients and minimal equipment.

“We always look at recipes from a budget and time perspective,” Hayden explains.

“Students don't have hours to cook, so we focus on meals they can realistically make. Whether it's a one-pan dinner, a rice cooker meal or even a microwave brownie in 90 seconds, the goal is to show them that cooking healthy food doesn't have to be difficult.”

Hayden Stewart, Core Programme Coordinator, The Kitchen Project

Students learn practical dishes they can continue making long after the class has finished, with many taking recipes home to prepare again or freezing meals in advance during busy exam periods.

More Than Learning to Cook

A rewarding outcome has been watching the confidence and relationships that develop over time. "It has become much more than standing at the front teaching," Hayden says.

“The students laugh together, make jokes, help each other and have fun. It's a chance to step away from study for a while, enjoy a meal together and build relationships with people they might otherwise never meet.”

This social connection has become an important part of the programme, particularly for students living in self-catered accommodation, where many spend long hours studying independently. The classes provide a welcoming environment where students can connect with others, share a meal and build friendships alongside practical life skills. Students regularly share they have recreated the recipes for flatmates, prepared meals in advance for busy study weeks and discovered that cooking nutritious food can be both affordable and achievable. The practical skills developed during the classes continue well beyond the kitchen, helping students establish healthy habits that support them throughout their university journey.

Measurable Impact

An evaluation undertaken by the University of Auckland Student Wellbeing team found the classes were making a measurable difference. Every student surveyed said they enjoyed the classes, while 94% rated the facilitator as approachable and supportive. Students’ comments reflected this positive feedback:

“Hayden is awesome” and “the instructions are lovely.”

Feedback from students living at Tirohanga o te Tōangaroa Stuart McCutcheon House and Carlaw Park Village, University of Auckland

The most significant improvement was in students' confidence preparing affordable meals, which increased from 44% to 79% following participation in the programme.

International students also reported greater confidence cooking with seasonal New Zealand ingredients, while overall cooking confidence increased across the cohort.

Beyond the practical benefits, students described the classes as an opportunity to connect with others and experience a greater sense of belonging through preparing and sharing food together, reinforcing the important role kai can play in supporting wellbeing and community.

One of the programme’s most valuable outcomes is seeing students recognise what they are capable of achieving. They leave with more than a recipe, gaining the confidence and practical skills to cook for themselves, eat well and prepare affordable, nutritious meals in their everyday lives. The cooking classes demonstrate how collaboration across Auckland's Learning Quarter can create lasting community impact.

By bringing together The Kitchen Project, University of Auckland Student Wellbeing and Mission Grocer, the initiative connects food entrepreneurship, affordable nutrition, practical education and student wellbeing into one integrated programme. It is a powerful example of how partnerships can create outcomes that extend well beyond any single organisation.

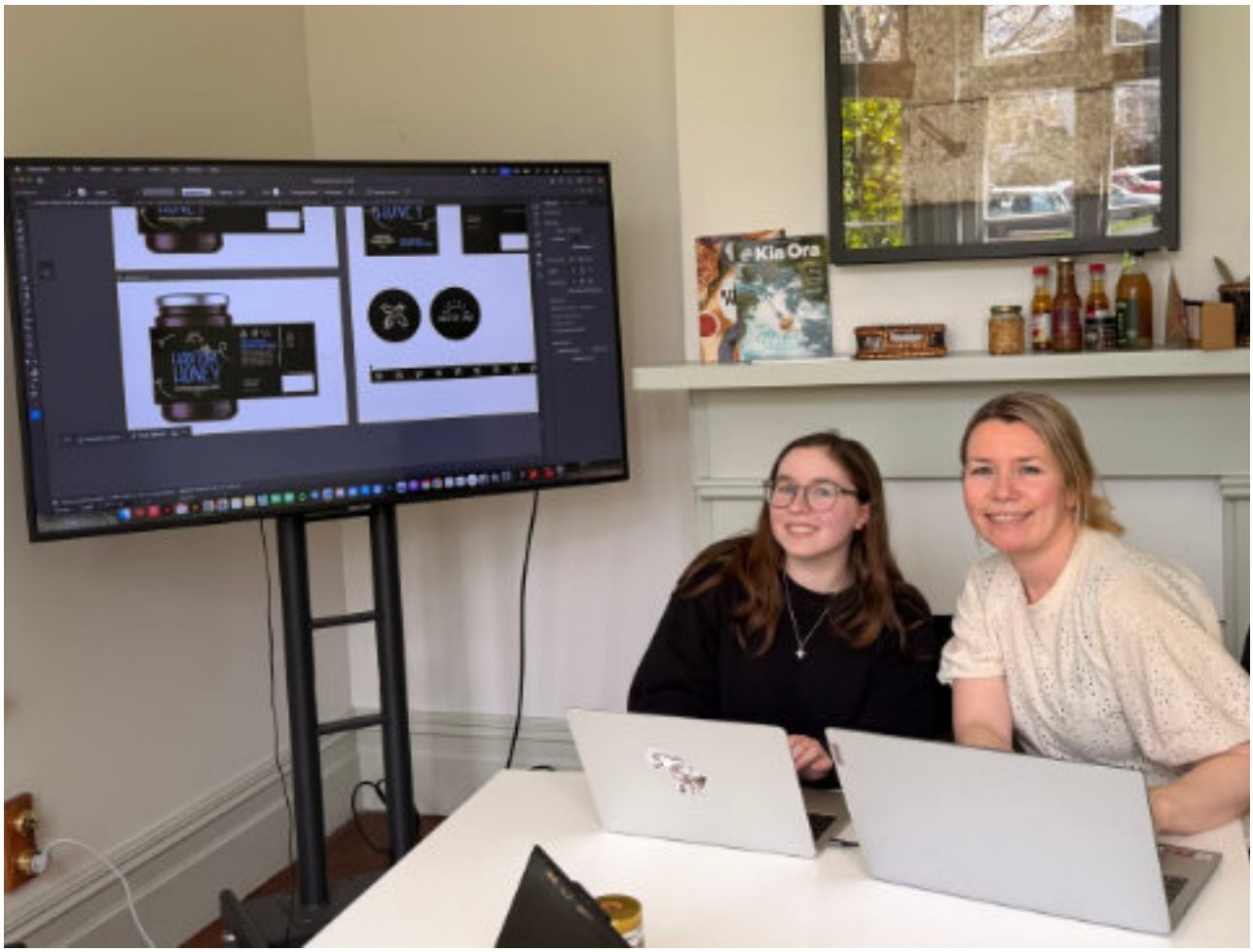
Learning Quarter Collaboration with AUT

The Kitchen Project's partnerships across Auckland's Learning Quarter continue to create opportunities that extend well beyond food entrepreneurship.

One of the newest collaborations brings AUT design students together with Kitchen Project entrepreneurs to develop professional branding, logos and visual identities for emerging food businesses.

Working with real clients gives students valuable industry experience and portfolio-ready projects, while entrepreneurs gain professionally developed branding that helps them present their businesses with confidence as they enter the market.

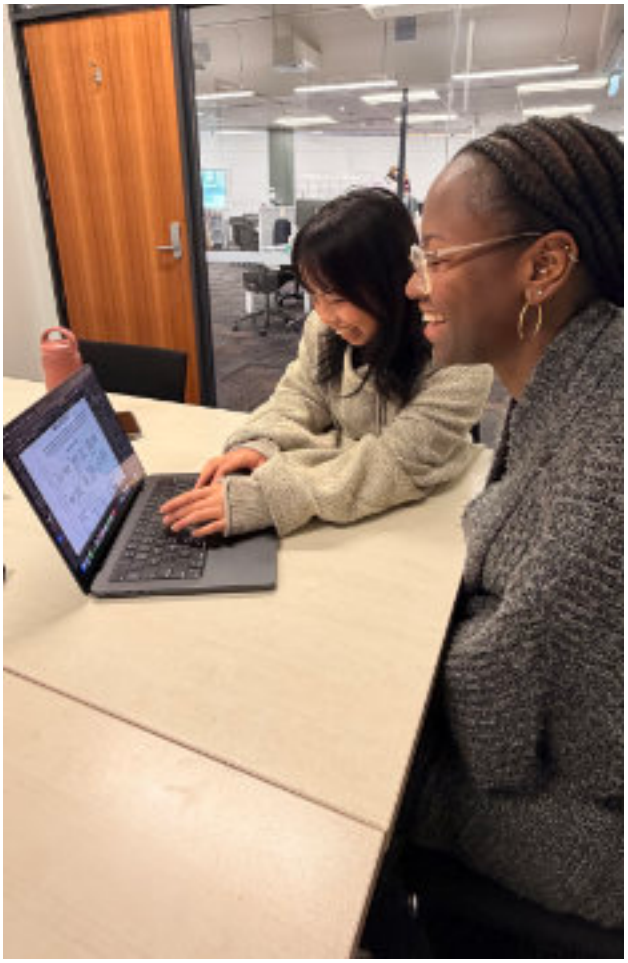

Design explorations
DUMPLING DING!
DUMPLING DING!
Design explorations
DUMPLING DING!
DUMPLING DING!


Kia Ora











The collaboration reflects The Kitchen Project's wider approach to partnership, creating opportunities where everyone benefits.

Students apply their skills in a real-world setting, entrepreneurs receive practical support to strengthen their businesses, and the Learning Quarter becomes a place where education, enterprise and community come together to create lasting impact.

Several entrepreneurs have already benefited from the initiative, including businesses whose refreshed branding is helping them establish a stronger presence in the marketplace. As these partnerships continue to grow, they demonstrate how collaboration across education and enterprise can create meaningful outcomes for everyone involved.

Looking Ahead

As Mission Grocer continues to grow and its offering becomes more widely known across Auckland, the focus remains on building stronger food communities and increasing access to affordable, nutritious kai.

One of the next projects on the horizon is the Mission Grocer *Kai* recipe book, developed in partnership with Love Food Hate Waste. Designed to help people make the most of affordable produce while reducing food waste, the cookbook features practical recipes, cooking tips and ideas inspired by the Mission Grocer community. The cookbook reflects Mission Grocer's commitment to making healthy food accessible while helping people build confidence in the kitchen. It is available through the Mission Grocer website: www.missiongrocer.co.nz.

For Kelly, the future is about continuing to build a food community where everyone feels welcome, healthy food is within reach, and people can connect, learn and support one another through shared experiences around food. At Whare Kai, that vision aligns closely with The Kitchen Project's commitment to creating opportunities for learning, entrepreneurship, community wellbeing and connection through kai.

Together, the two organisations are helping create a more connected, resilient and food-secure Auckland.

09. COMMUNITY WELLBEING CENTRES

THE KITCHEN PROJECT COOKIE BOXES CONTINUE TO CREATE MOMENTS OF CREATIVITY, CONNECTION AND WELLBEING ACROSS TAMAKI MAKAURAU.

A Sweet Way to Bring People Together

What began as a simple idea to bring people together through food has continued to grow into one of The Kitchen Project's most popular community initiatives.

Designed as a ready-to-use activity for libraries, community hubs, Auckland Council facilities and wellbeing programmes, the Cookie Boxes provide everything needed to host a fun and engaging "decorate your own cookie" experience. Each kit includes 100 freshly baked shortbread cookies, colourful icing, disposable gloves, serviettes, wipes and table coverings, making it easy for organisations to deliver a creative activity that encourages conversation and connection.

More Than Just a Cookie

The Cookie Boxes are handcrafted by The Kitchen Project's Core Programme Coordinator and chef, Hayden Stewart, who has continued to evolve the initiative over the past year.

Alongside the original designs, Hayden now creates seasonal collections celebrating occasions such as Easter, Matariki and other community events, allowing organisations to tailor activities with colours and cookie shapes throughout the year.

"The Cookie Boxes are about much more than decorating biscuits. They create an opportunity for people to sit together, have a conversation and enjoy a shared experience. Sometimes it's the simplest activities that create the strongest sense of connection."

Connie Clarkson, Manager, The Kitchen Project

Growing Community Impact

As demand has grown, so too has production. Thousands of cookies have now been prepared for Auckland Council departments, libraries, community wellbeing centres and local events across Tāmaki Makaurau, bringing people of all ages together through a simple, accessible activity.

The Cookie Boxes have become particularly popular because they are inclusive, easy to deliver and adaptable to a wide range of audiences. From children decorating their first biscuits to older adults enjoying a creative social activity, the initiative continues to demonstrate how food can support wellbeing while strengthening community connections.



Small Idea, Lasting Impact

The Cookie Box reflects The Kitchen Project's wider philosophy that food is about far more than nourishment. It is about creating opportunities for people to connect, celebrate and experience joy together.

As the programme continues to evolve, The Kitchen Project is exploring new seasonal themes, responding to growing demand and identifying further opportunities to expand the initiative. It remains a simple idea with a lasting impact, demonstrating how small acts of creativity can help build stronger, healthier and more connected communities, one cookie at a time.


200PC DISPOSABL
SIZE:27CM
ALCOHOL
PARABEN
SOAP &
NUT FREE
NZ
BABY
WIPES
FRAGRANCE FREE

Tātaki Auckland Unlimited

Today's produce and ingredients:

Outstanding NZ Food Producer Awards (ONZFPA) Winners	
Tora Collective	Kina and Pāua
Matangi Grass Fed Angus Beef	Lamb loin - boneless cap on
	Tomahawk Steak
The Kitchen Project Graduate and ONZFPA Winners	
Dona Lou Goan Cuisine	Prawn Balchao
The Smoke Shed	BBQ sauce
Long Dog Sauce Co	Dill Pickle Sauce
The Kitchen Project Graduate and Artisan Food Awards Winner	
UmamiBee	Sasarup
The Kitchen Project 2025 Debutant	
Foca Sandwiches	Fresh baked focaccia
Franklin Food Producers	
Clevedon Coast Oysters	Oysters
Curious Croppers	Heirloom Tomatoes
Black Pond Farm	Skirt Steak and Prime Mince
Kai Ika Project	Fish heads and wings
Live Fish Market	Marlborough Mussels

Contact: Connie Clarkson, The Kitchen Project Manager
Mobile: +642102715803, Email: connie.clarkson@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz

10. CREATING AUTHENTIC AUCKLAND EXPERIENCES

BRINGING FOOD, CULTURE, LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY WEALTH TOGETHER.

Our approach to creating kai experiences reflects The Kitchen Project's commitment to community wealth building, where a single event can create opportunities for numerous independent food businesses, producers and entrepreneurs on what could be a local, national and international stage. By sharing commercial opportunities across many small to medium enterprises, event investment is distributed more equitably. This helps strengthen local enterprise, build business capability and support more resilient neighbourhood economies across Auckland.

The Kitchen Project: Kai Experiences for Tāmaki Makaurau

Over the past year, The Kitchen Project has grown beyond its role as a food business incubator. It now also curates and delivers kai experiences for business, tourism and hospitality events, in partnership with event organisers, venues, caterers and community partners.

Each collaborative experience brings together food entrepreneurs, local producers, chefs, performers and students, many drawn from Auckland's intergenerational, multicultural and migrant communities and diasporas. Their food traditions and stories sit at the heart of every event. The team manages end to end delivery from concept creation, menu development and entrepreneur selection through to programming, entertainment, logistics, storytelling and on-site coordination.

Strengthening Auckland's Business Events and Kai Tourism Offer

This model broadens the range of authentic and distinctive experiences available to event organisers and gives international visitors especially, a genuine taste of Tāmaki Makaurau's culinary portfolio and manaakitanga: the warmth, hospitality and generosity that define how this city welcomes our guests.

Leaning into more than two decades of local, national and international event creation and management experience with the TKP team, each occasion is carefully designed to celebrate Auckland's unique identity while supporting local businesses, strengthening partnerships and creating memorable experiences.

As organisations increasingly seek experiences that reflect the places they visit, kai has become one of the most compelling ways to tell Auckland's story.

Driving Local Economic Development

The approach advances community wealth building. A single event can open commercial opportunities to many small food businesses, producers and entrepreneurs, distributing event spend more equitably, building business capability and supporting more resilient local economies across the region. This helps strengthen local enterprise, build business capability and support more resilient neighbourhood economies across Auckland.

This year, the model has been showcased across The Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education Chefs Experience and the TRENZ 2026 Farewell Function.

Connecting People, Place and Culture at Velskov in the Waitākere Ranges

Earlier in the year, The Kitchen Project assisted the curation of a very different, yet equally memorable, food experience at Velskov, a regenerative native forest farm in the Waitākere Ranges.

Developed in partnership with Tataki Auckland Unlimited, the gathering welcomed Indigenous chefs from Aotearoa, Hawai'i, Australia, Samoa and North America during the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education. Set within native forest, the experience combined guided foraging, open-fire















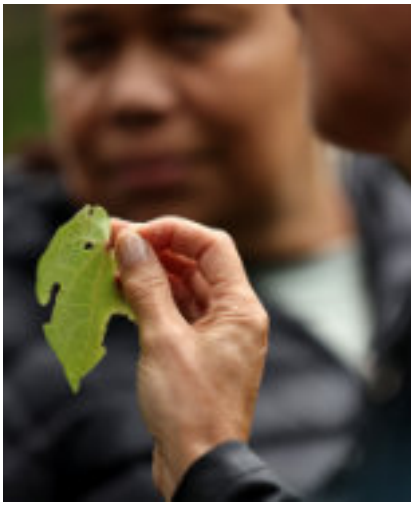
















cooking and shared storytelling, creating opportunities to explore indigenous food systems, sustainability and the relationship between food, culture and whenua.

Drawing on relationships built through close to a decade of judging The Outstanding Food Producers Awards, The Kitchen Project brought together a pantry filled with award-winning local producers, TKP alumni food businesses and Kai Franklin growers, curating ingredients that showcased the flavours and food stories of Aotearoa.

By connecting international chefs with local producers, entrepreneurs and indigenous knowledge holders, the event became far more than a shared meal. It created a platform for cultural exchange, relationship building and international collaboration through food.

Farewell Celebration for TRENZ 2026

One of The Kitchen Project's largest projects of the year was curating the farewell celebration for TRENZ 2026. The result was a seamless celebration of the diversity, creativity and hospitality of contemporary Tāmaki Makaurau, described throughout the venue as "our love letter, our haere mai, our manaakitanga from us to the world."

TRENZ is New Zealand's largest international tourism business event, organised by Tourism Industry Aotearoa to connect New Zealand operators with international buyers and media. In 2026, more than 1,200 delegates, including 379 buyers from 27 countries, held over 16,000 meetings across two and a half days, building relationships that drive future visitation and tourism export growth.

TRENZ returned to Tāmaki Makaurau for the first time in nine years, hosted at the new New Zealand International Convention Centre. As Auckland's regional tourism organisation, Tātaki Auckland Unlimited led the region's hosting role, with the event projected to inject more than NZ$3 million into the local economy.

More than 800 delegates gathered at the Viaduct Events Centre for a vibrant, street-party-style farewell celebration. The culinary showcase featured a collection of 13 Top 100 Auckland Iconic dishes representing 10 countries and eight neighbourhoods. This was accompanied by five matching wines by 5 Auckland wineries made exclusively from grapes grown in Tāmaki Makaurau.

The street festival experience featured Auckland's Mother of Drag Buckwheat and her girls, world-renowned, Auckland street dance company IDCO and live music. An Auckland experience, not through presentations or brochures, but through its people, flavours and stories.

Connecting Opportunities

Although different in scale, both projects demonstrated the same philosophy. The Kitchen Project acted as the connector, bringing together organisations, entrepreneurs, producers, educators and performers who may not otherwise have collaborated. From coordinating logistics and curating menus to sourcing local producers and managing partnerships, the team transformed individual contributors into cohesive event experiences that celebrated Auckland's unique identity.

These collaborations also created tangible opportunities for participating businesses. Entrepreneurs gained valuable commercial experience, local producers reached new audiences, students worked alongside industry professionals, and visitors experienced authentic stories that could not be replicated through traditional event delivery alone.

A New Model for Event Delivery

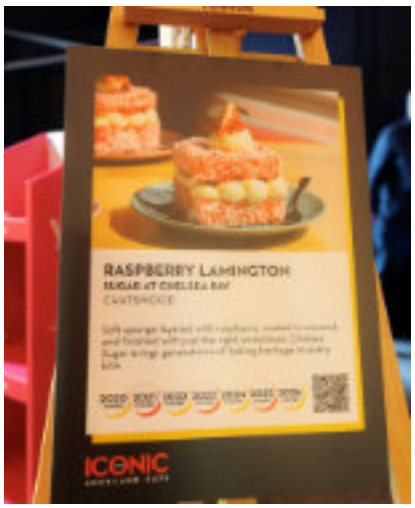
Together, these projects demonstrate how food can contribute to far more than hospitality. By combining entrepreneurship, cultural storytelling, tourism, education and community partnerships, The Kitchen Project is helping reshape how events can create economic, social and cultural value. Each experience supports local procurement, celebrates Auckland's diversity and ensures that event investment contributes to community wealth building across Tāmaki Makaurau.

As The Kitchen Project continues to grow, these collaborations represent an important new capability for the organisation. Working alongside caterers, event agencies and partner organisations, the programme is creating distinctive, place-based food experiences that showcase Auckland through its people, its cultures and its communities.



Whether welcoming international tourism delegates, hosting Indigenous culinary leaders or supporting major hospitality events such as the Lewisham Awards, each project demonstrates the same belief: when food reflects the people and places that shape Tāmaki Makaurau, every event becomes an opportunity to create meaningful connections, celebrate local enterprise and leave a lasting impression.


CARMEL ISRAELI STREET FOOD


RASPBERRY LAMINGTON
ICONIC


GIAPO


ICONIC
ICONIC
ICONIC
ICONIC




The White Lady



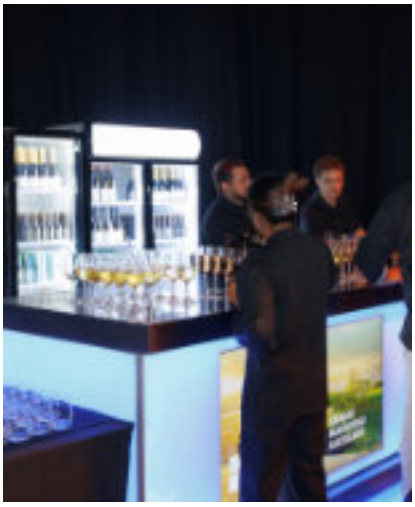















FRESH PASTA


The Whi

11. KAI FRANKLIN

GROWING COMMUNITY WEALTH THROUGH PLACE.

Kai Franklin is a place-based initiative that celebrates Franklin's unique food identity while creating opportunities for local businesses, growers, producers, hospitality operators and the wider community to thrive together. Delivered by The Kitchen Project in partnership with the Auckland Urban Development Office, the Franklin Local Board, the Pukekohe Business Association, the initiative is centred around 1 Roulston Street in Pukekohe. More than simply a venue, the space has become a community hub where food, entrepreneurship and collaboration come together, supporting local business, activating the town centre and strengthening Franklin's growing food economy.

Kai Franklin demonstrates how food can be a catalyst for economic development by connecting local growers, restaurants, entrepreneurs, schools and community organisations. Through events, business programmes and partnerships, the initiative encourages people to buy local, celebrate local and invest in the businesses that make Franklin one of New Zealand's most significant food-producing regions. By creating opportunities to experience Franklin's food locally, the initiative is helping more of the economic value generated by the region's produce remain within the community.

Chef's Table - A Celebration of Franklin's Food Story

One of the year's highlights was Kai Franklin Chef's Table, where almost 100 guests gathered for a four-course dining experience celebrating the people behind Franklin's food story.

Designed as a true farm-to-table experience, every course showcased seasonal produce grown within the region and prepared by some of Franklin's best-known hospitality businesses. Guests enjoyed inventive canapés from The Daily Goods, an Asian-inspired entrée by Blue Ox Babe, a modern main course from Seddon 64 Eatery & Bar, and dessert by Apetite, with beverages provided by Franklin's Bar & Eatery. Throughout the evening, chefs shared the stories behind their dishes and acknowledged the growers and producers whose ingredients made each course possible, reinforcing the close relationship between those who grow food and those who bring it to the plate.

"We were excited to bring together talented local chefs, growers and the community to celebrate the very best of what Franklin has to offer."

Connie Clarkson, Manager, The Kitchen Project

Supporting Local, Together

Chef's Table perfectly demonstrated The Kitchen Project's commitment to community wealth building. Rather than focusing the event around a single venue or supplier, the evening created opportunities across Franklin's food ecosystem. Restaurants, growers, producers, suppliers, musicians, hospitality students and local businesses all contributed to the experience, ensuring the economic and social benefits were shared across the community. As Connie explained following the event: "Chef's Table is about celebrating the incredible growers, producers, chefs and hospitality businesses that make Franklin so special. When we support local, we're investing in the people and businesses that strengthen our community."

The evening also highlighted Franklin's nationally significant role as one of New Zealand's primary food-producing regions, reminding guests that supporting local growers strengthens both regional economies and New Zealand's wider food system.

The event's wider value was also recognised by Franklin Ward Councillor Andy Baker:

"Kai Franklin Chef's Table is a great example of local economic development in action. It keeps spending local, backs Pukekohe's hospitality businesses and builds real community wealth. Best of all, it gives Pukekohe High School students hands-on experience alongside professional chefs, opening doors to careers right here at home."

Councillor Andy Baker, Franklin Ward, Auckland Council


kai
FRANKLIN
The
Auckland Council
whānau









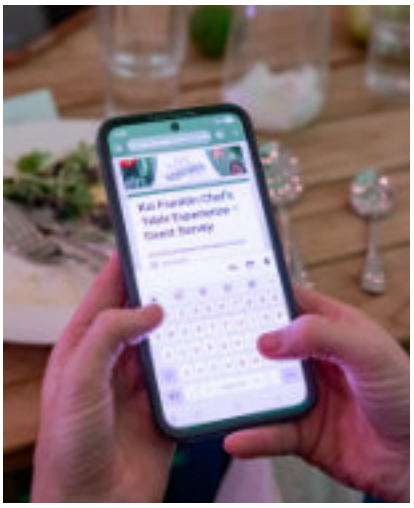






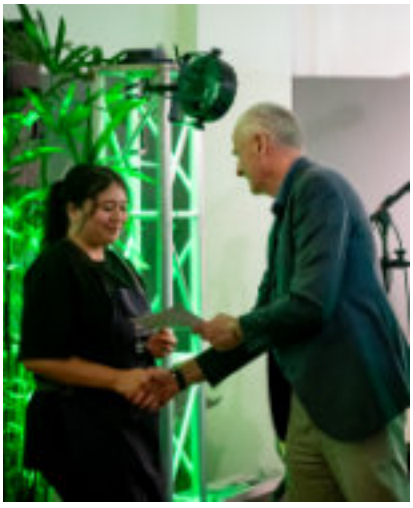













kai
FRANKLIN
CHEF'S TABLE
CANAPES
ENTREE
MAIN
DESSERT



Creating Pathways

Chef's Table also provided valuable real-world experience for students from Pukekohe High School's Hospitality Pathway Programme, who delivered front-of-house service alongside experienced hospitality professionals.

For many students it was their first opportunity to work at a large-scale dining event, building confidence while allowing local businesses to meet the next generation of hospitality talent.

As Connie observed, the evening gave businesses

"a glimpse at the talent growing up on their doorstep – future hospitality stars in the making."

Measurable Impact

Guest feedback demonstrated that Chef's Table achieved much more than delivering an exceptional dining experience.

The event received an overall rating of 8.9 out of 10, with service rated 9.3 out of 10, while nearly all guests said they were likely to visit participating restaurants after the event.

More than half (58%) said learning about local produce was one of the evening's highlights, and 42% said the experience changed the way they viewed Franklin's food story.

Guests described the evening as:

"The food was amazing, the service was amazing…stunning event."

"Great atmosphere, very community focused."

"Fabulous event. Will come again."

Chef's Table is just one example of how Kai Franklin is helping strengthen Franklin's food ecosystem.

Alongside The Kitchen Project's Pukekohe cohort programme, community activations and future events such as Eat Street, Kai Franklin continues to demonstrate how place-based food initiatives can create lasting economic and social value.

By connecting entrepreneurs, growers, hospitality businesses, schools and the wider community, the initiative is building community wealth, celebrating Franklin's unique identity and creating opportunities that extend well beyond a single event.

Looking to Franklin's Future

Franklin is already recognised as one of New Zealand's most important food-producing regions, supplying fresh produce to communities across Auckland and the country.

As Pukekohe continues to grow and new investment flows into the region, there is an opportunity to build on this legacy by strengthening not only food production, but also food innovation, hospitality, tourism and entrepreneurship.

Kai Franklin is helping shape that future by creating stronger connections between growers, producers, restaurants, entrepreneurs, schools and the wider community.

Through initiatives like Chef's Table, the focus extends beyond growing exceptional food to creating memorable food experiences that celebrate the people, places and stories behind every ingredient.

By showcasing local produce through hospitality, events and entrepreneurship, Kai Franklin is helping more of the value created by Franklin's food economy remain within the region.

It is creating new opportunities for local businesses, supporting collaboration across the food sector and encouraging visitors and residents alike to experience Franklin through its food.

As Kai Franklin continues to evolve, The Kitchen Project sees significant potential for the initiative to become a catalyst for place-based economic development.

Building on Franklin's reputation as New Zealand's food bowl, the programme will continue creating opportunities that celebrate not only what Franklin grows, but also the businesses, experiences and partnerships that transform world-class produce into world-class food experiences.

12. TKP HIGHLIGHTS 2025/2026

JULY



Cohort 21 host Tasting Event at Auckland Central Library

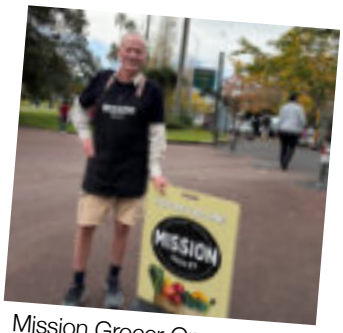


Five alumni showcased at 2025 Auckland Food Show

SEPTEMBER



Nusa debut at The Halal Collective Market Day Festival



Mission Grocer Opens store at Whare Kai Albert Park

OCTOBER



Cohort 23 host Tasting Event at Pukekohe



Grow Nola's debut at Grey Lynn Farmers Market



Alumni gathering with The Kitchen Project whanau

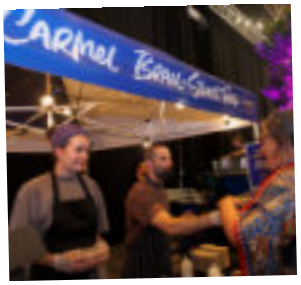
NOVEMBER



Cohort 24 host Tasting Event at Auckland Central Library



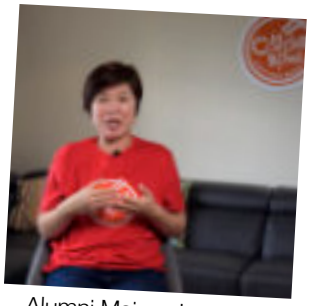
After a long journey Nusa receives food safety grade



Alumni Carmel Israeli Street Food provide catering for TRENZ 2026 event



TKP curates TRENZ 2026 farewell celebration, NZ's premier international tourism business event



Alumni Maisen Leung of Comfort Bowl featured Neighbourhood Stories YouTube Series

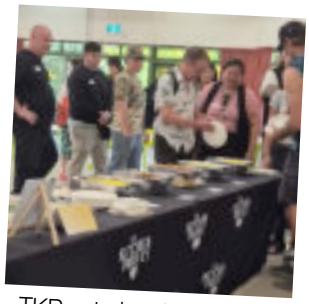
DECEMBER



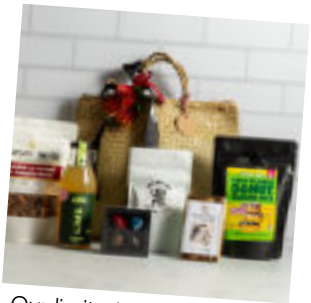
Social Media 101 with mentor Lew from The Hospo Guy



Mentor Jess Stebbings completes accounting module with cohort



TKP catering the 12th Kai Regional Network Hui



Our limited-edition Kitchen Project kete make the perfect Christmas gift

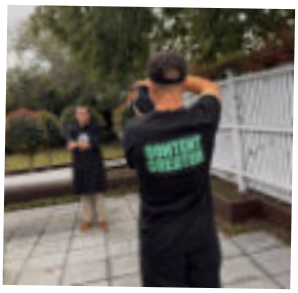
JANUARY



Mentor Dave Saunders of Aro Advisors shares business tips for success

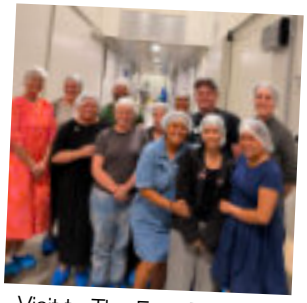


BNZ's Winidu Kannangara mentors financing with our entrepreneurs



Photoshoot and food styling with cohort 21

MARCH



Visit to The FoodBowl by alumni interested in future food production possibilities

APRIL



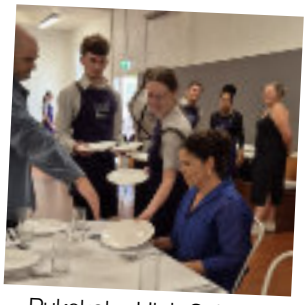
Rupa debuts Lassi Lady at local market



Cohort 25 host Tasting Event at Auckland Central Library



Alumni gathering extra special with our first TKP manager Sreshta Sridhar



Pukekohe High School students complete training for Chef's Table

MAY



Photoshoot and food styling with cohort 24



TKP hosts Kai Franklin Chef's Table in Pukekohe



Chef's Table 100 guests rated event 8.9/10 and with service 9.3/10



Award-winning laksa by TKP alumna Sharlini Thevishri of Irene Dragon Cuisine, recognised in the Iconic Top 100 Auckland Eat

JUNE



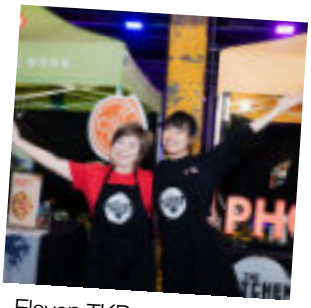
Pastels achieve milestone with food safety grade



The Kitchen Project curates award winning produce for indigenous chefs event at Velskov in Waitakere Ranges



Connie Clarkson recognised with Lewisham Lifetime Achievement Award



Eleven TKP entrepreneurs cater The Lewisham Awards 2026

13. MEET OUR EXPERTS AND MENTORS

The Kitchen Project gives entrepreneurs direct access to respected food industry leaders, hospitality experts and business mentors. Through practical workshops and one-to-one mentoring, participants build skills in business planning, branding, pricing, marketing, compliance and customer experience, gaining the confidence to turn food ideas into sustainable businesses. These sessions build bridges between emerging entrepreneurs and industry leaders, validating ideas and creating opportunities that can shape future business. One entrepreneur reflected on their experience:

"The past six months I've been working on something I've always wanted to do but kept putting aside. All I needed was that last push. Interviews, mentorship, practical sessions, continuous research and development, business upskilling, brand work, mock market day, one-to-ones and new friendships. It was a lot of work, but I loved every minute of it. I'm grateful to The Kitchen Project managers, our mentors and this new community I now belong to. It has been a turning point in my personal development journey."



Lisa Franklin
Media Manager, AUDO
Founding Partner TKP



Jacqui Yip
Principal Advisor, Public Health Engagement and Innovation
Public Health Agency



Sue Ollerton
WasteWise Advisor, Community WasteWise, Waste Solutions at Auckland Council



Carmel Davidovitch
Carmel's Israeli Street Food
TKP graduate, Iconic Restaurant
/ Lived experience



Bertrand Jang
Sweet & Me
TKP Graduate, Iconic Bakery
/ Lived experience



Julie Yu
Phở Yến
TKP Graduate, Restaurant
/ Lived experience



Shannon Kelly
General Manager Merchandise
Farro



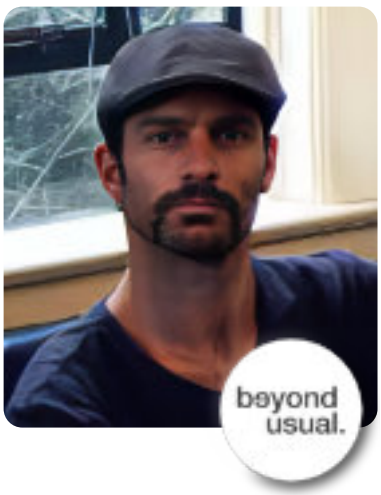
Max Washer
The White Lady, Iconic
Food Truck / Hospitality



Pip Malpas
Little Pips
TKP Graduate, Iconic Beverage
/ Lived experience



John Evans
Beverage and Food Gurus Ltd
Food & Beverage Consultancy



Josh Page
Beyond Usual
Food Innovation / Marketing



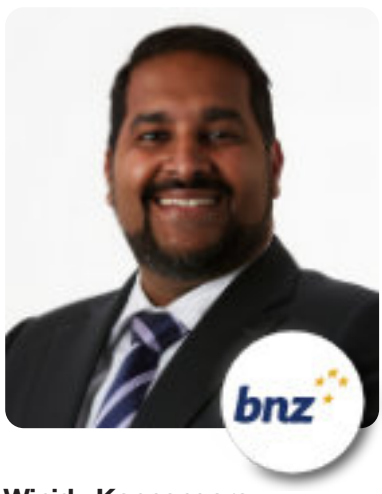
Scott Kington
Beyond Usual
Food Innovation / Marketing



Jessica Stebbings
Jessica Stebbings Ltd
Pukekohe Accounting Services



Dave Saunders
Aro Accounting Ltd
Accounting / Food Industry



Winidu Kannangara
BNZ, Commercial Banking Relationship
Manager Banking / Finance




Zavo


SILLY CHILLY
BRUNCH CRUNCH








CHACKAL
CHACKAL















14. OUR TEAM

THE DEDICATED TEAM BEHIND TKP: PASSIONATE PROFESSIONALS COMMITTED TO FOSTERING FOOD ENTREPRENEURS, COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND WELLNESS.

Operations Team



Connie Clarkson

Manager

As the Manager of The Kitchen Project, Connie is responsible for programme design and partner engagement, and oversees the operational delivery of the programme, supporting entrepreneurs as they turn their food business ideas into realities. She leads the team responsible for the day-to-day coordination across TKP's sites.

Connie's extensive operational experience spans hospitality, engagement, placemaking, property management, marketing, public relations, food and beverage, venue and event management, project management, and professional training.

Connie's hands-on leadership ensures the smooth running of the Core Programme and its wider activities, strengthening relationships with community partners, suppliers, and industry stakeholders.



Esperanza Reyes

Technical Specialist

In her role as the Technical Specialist for The Kitchen Project, Esperanza adeptly manages the programme's regulatory requirements and coordination. As a programme participant herself, she brings firsthand entrepreneurial experience as the master grower behind Mushroom Mate, her business specialising in oyster mushrooms, flavour-rich pastes, and salts.

Esperanza's extensive background as a food technologist in food regulation and compliance equips her to offer invaluable guidance to our entrepreneurs. With over a decade of experience in roles like Regional Regulatory Services Specialist at Foodstuffs North Island and Quality Assurance Manager at Pitango, Esperanza's expertise in food safety and quality management is a cornerstone of her contribution to the programme.



Hayden Stewart

Core Programme Coordinator

Hayden Stewart, as the Core Programme Coordinator for The Kitchen Project, oversees the coordination of our cohorts, kitchen operations, and logistics. Bringing over 20 years of culinary expertise as a chef, Hayden is also a proud graduate of The Kitchen Project.

Hayden's entrepreneurial journey led him to establish The Flying Rib, a business born out of his passion for nose-to-tail cooking and offering unique food experiences. Beyond his culinary endeavours, Hayden is deeply committed to uplifting the community, having also worked with Tuakana Teina (East, West & Central Auckland) at the Generator.

Steering Group



Connie Clarkson

Manager, The Kitchen Project

Connie is the originator and strategic lead of The Kitchen Project, with over 30 years' experience in placemaking, hospitality, and local economic development. A passionate advocate for food, community wealth building, and inclusive entrepreneurship, she guided the programme from concept to an influential incubator supporting Māori, Pacific, Indigenous, migrant, and women-led ventures. In 2025, Connie was recognised by *Cuisine* as one of the 50 most influential women in food and drink in New Zealand. Connie also judges the Outstanding NZ Food Producer Awards and NZ Ice Cream Awards. Her leadership has shaped major urban regeneration projects across Tāmaki Makaurau, including North Wharf, Queens Wharf, and The Cloud. She also serves on The Lewisham Foundation executive committee, championing excellence in Auckland's hospitality sector.



Echo Janman

Manager, Community Hub Central City, Auckland Council

As the Manager of Community Hub Central City and part of TKP's leadership team, Echo oversees teams across the Auckland Central City Library, Ellen Melville Centre, and Albert Park Caretaker's Cottage. With over two decades of experience in arts and community work, she is a strong advocate for innovation, creativity, and social change. Echo led the integration of digital tools for community engagement, developed social innovation strategies, and fostered value-driven partnerships that enrich Auckland's community life. Echo's background in project development, creative placemaking, and cross-sector collaboration directly informs her contribution to TKP's kaupapa. TKP benefits from her deep understanding of culturally grounded programming and long-standing commitment to social equity.



Jacqui Yip

Principal Advisor - Engagement & Innovation, Public Health Agency

Jacqui has been involved with TKP since 2019, delivering Health and Food System sessions, mentoring entrepreneurs, and supporting programme strategy. Born in Hong Kong and raised in Aotearoa, she brings experience as a public health dietitian and food systems innovator, along with a commitment to strengthening local food systems to support community wellbeing. Jacqui currently works at the Ministry of Health in a role focused on elevating community voice through engagement and innovation.



Ben Maw

Principal Advisor - Development Response | City Centre Programmes, Auckland Council

Ben brings extensive food industry and urban regeneration experience to TKP's leadership team, with his career spanning public and private sector roles. He has managed waterfront operations at Eke Panuku, led healthy food system initiatives in South Auckland, and managed major food and catering teams at Auckland Zoo and Auckland Council. He later served as Healthy Families Council Lead for Food Systems at The Southern Initiative. At TKP, Ben shapes programme direction, aligning it with food sovereignty, urban regeneration, and equitable development. His understanding of food systems and supply chains supports sustainable business models and strengthens links to Council's priorities. Ben's approach positions food entrepreneurship as a driver of wellbeing, cultural expression, and local resilience.

15. 2026 AND BEYOND

AN EXCITING NEW CHAPTER FOR THE KITCHEN PROJECT.

The year ahead marks the beginning of an exciting new chapter for The Kitchen Project.

Strengthening Pathways for Entrepreneurs

As we continue supporting aspiring food entrepreneurs through our community programmes, we are equally focused on creating stronger pathways that help graduates build sustainable businesses and contribute to Auckland's growing food economy. This evolution reflects the natural progression of both our entrepreneurs and our organisation. We remain committed to our community wellbeing foundations while expanding opportunities through partnerships, innovation and economic development.

Expanding Opportunities Through Events and Partnerships

One area where this shift is already becoming evident is through major business events. Over the past year, initiatives such as TRENZ and the Lewisham Awards have demonstrated a new approach, distributing food opportunities across dozens of emerging food businesses and creating new pathways for entrepreneurs to showcase their products and cuisines.

These projects hint at the potential to reshape how Tāmaki Makaurau supplies kai for business events, ensuring that more of the economic benefits flow directly into local communities and small businesses.

The coming year will also see us continue strengthening partnerships across education, industry, local government and the wider food sector.

Pilot initiatives, including collaborations with FoodBowl and other strategic partners, will help test new ways of improving access to commercial facilities, specialist equipment and industry expertise. These partnerships are important stepping stones towards the longer-term vision outlined through KaiAKL.

"Our role is to connect people, create opportunities and remove barriers so entrepreneurs can focus on doing what they do best. When we bring together the right partners, everyone benefits: the businesses, the industry and the wider community."

Connie Clarkson, Manager, The Kitchen Project

Growing Our Alumni Community

We also expect to continue expanding opportunities for alumni beyond the programme itself. Increasingly, graduates are returning not only for advice, but because they value being part of a network of like-minded entrepreneurs who understand the challenges and opportunities of building a food business. Supporting this growing alumni community, creating new collaborations and opening more doors to markets and customers will remain a priority.

Sharing Stories and Celebrating Success

Another focus for the year ahead will be continuing to share the stories of our entrepreneurs and the impact they are making across Tāmaki Makaurau. By celebrating milestones, recognising achievements and showcasing the diversity of businesses emerging from The Kitchen Project, we hope to inspire the next generation of food entrepreneurs while strengthening connections with customers, partners and the wider community. Every success story helps demonstrate what is possible when talent is nurtured, culture is celebrated and opportunity is created.

As we look ahead, we are excited by what is possible. The foundations have been laid, partnerships are growing, and the appetite for collaboration has never been stronger. Together with our entrepreneurs, mentors, partners and supporters, we look forward to continuing to reshape opportunities for food entrepreneurship across Tāmaki Makaurau, creating a future where more people can build successful businesses, celebrate culture through kai and contribute to a thriving, resilient local economy.


MAHARAJA'S
CHUTNEY

16. MEDIA AND PUBLIC PRESENCE

THE KITCHEN PROJECT AND OUR PARTICIPANTS HAVE FEATURED IN A VARIETY OF MEDIA CHANNELS AND BLOGS.





Kia Ora Magazine: Tasting notes
Since 2018, The Kitchen Project has been changing and growing the food scene in Tāmaki Makaurau, one delicious bite at a time.
Read here.





FMCG Magazine: Award-winning mushroom products, grown by us
Crafted in New Zealand, in Hunua, on the edge of the beautiful Hunua Ranges, using oyster mushrooms and lion's mane, our award-winning products are inspired by Filipino flavours.
Read here.



Radio New Zealand:
Steamed Chicken and Prawn Tofu with Spicy Sauce
Read here.



Franklin Times:
Kai Time! Kitchen Project serves up Chef's Table
Read here.



Cuisine Magazine:
Aotearoa New Zealand's Top 50 Most Influential & Inspiring Women In Food & Drink 2026
Read here.



Cuisine Magazine:
Connie Clarkson takes us into the heart of Peranakan cuisine
Read here.



University of Auckland:
On a mission to make healthy food affordable
Read here.



NZ Herald Viva:
The Kitchen Project Mentor Connie Clarkson On Her Must-Have Home Kitchen Staples
Read here.



Radio New Zealand:
The Kitchen Project's Connie Clarkson joins us with a divine dish to celebrate Chinese New Year, crayfish e fu noodles.
Read here.



Radio New Zealand:
Food: Cooking for one with Connie Clarkson
Read here.



Metro Magazine:
Top 50 Baked Goods Part 2: More of Metro's favourite baked items, Sweet & Me
Read here.



17. THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

COLLABORATION FUELS OUR MISSION.

Stronger Together

The Kitchen Project is built on partnership. Every programme, event, collaboration and opportunity featured throughout this report has been made possible by organisations and individuals who share our belief in the power of food to strengthen communities, create economic opportunity and celebrate the rich diversity of Tāmaki Makaurau.

Over the past year, our network has continued to grow, bringing together local government, education providers, industry leaders, community organisations, mentors, sponsors and food entrepreneurs in new and meaningful ways. Together, these partnerships have helped create pathways for emerging businesses, foster innovation and build a more connected food ecosystem.

From supporting aspiring entrepreneurs through our cohort programme to creating opportunities at major events such as TRENZ and the Lewisham Awards, every collaboration has demonstrated what is possible when organisations work towards a shared purpose. Partnerships have also strengthened initiatives including Whare Kai, Kai Franklin, Mission Grocer and the University of Auckland's student cooking programme, creating lasting benefits that extend well beyond individual projects.

Equally important are the many mentors, volunteers and industry professionals who generously share their knowledge, experience and networks. Their willingness to guide emerging entrepreneurs, open doors and champion new ideas has helped participants build confidence, develop new skills and create businesses that contribute to Auckland's vibrant food community.

The Kitchen Project also values the growing network of alumni who continue to support one another long after graduation. Increasingly, former participants are returning as mentors, collaborators, suppliers and advocates, demonstrating that partnership is not simply something we create with organisations, but a culture that continues to grow within our own community.

With Sincere Thanks

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Auckland Council, the Franklin Local Board, our Learning Quarter partners, funders, community organisations, education providers, industry partners, mentors, volunteers and the many businesses and individuals who have contributed their time, expertise and encouragement throughout the year.



Together, we are building more than successful food businesses. We are creating opportunities, strengthening local communities and helping shape a more inclusive, resilient and prosperous food future for Tāmaki Makaurau.

As we look ahead, we remain excited about what can be achieved together. By continuing to invest in partnerships, celebrate local enterprise and connect people through food, we can create even more opportunities for entrepreneurs, strengthen community wealth and help shape a food system that reflects the diversity, creativity and resilience of our region.

STRONGER TOGETHER, BUILDING OUR FOOD ECOSYSTEM.



Many partners. One shared purpose.
Building community wealth through food.




CHUNKY BEEF XO
CHUNKY XO SAUCE WITH
REAL BEEF CHUNKS
100% NZ Grass-Fed Beef
Fresh, Local Ingredients
Chef-Crafted
No Added Sugar
No Preservatives

18. CONNECT WITH US

TURNING FOOD IDEAS INTO ACTION.

Turn Your Food Idea into a Business

Do you have a food idea inspired by your culture, family or community? Ready to take the next step?

The Kitchen Project supports aspiring food entrepreneurs to develop the confidence, skills and connections needed to build sustainable food businesses. Participants gain practical business knowledge, one-to-one mentoring, industry connections and become part of a supportive alumni community that continues well beyond graduation.

If you're passionate about food and ready to turn your idea into a thriving business, we'd love to hear from you. Apply online at:

www.thekitchenproject.co.nz/apply

Creating Food Experiences with Community Impact

The Kitchen Project partners with councils, government agencies, tertiary institutions, community organisations, tourism operators and event organisers to deliver food-led initiatives that create lasting social, cultural and economic impact.

From Whare Kai and Kai Franklin to TRENZ, the Lewisham Awards and community wellbeing programmes, we bring together entrepreneurs, local producers, educators, chefs and industry partners to create authentic food experiences that celebrate Auckland's diversity while building community wealth.

What We Offer

- Food-led community activation and placemaking
- Collaborative event and catering experiences
- Community engagement and co-design
- Entrepreneurship programmes and business incubation
- Cooking classes, demonstrations and workshops
- Entrepreneur matching for catering, events and activations
- Industry partnerships and food ecosystem development
- Programme design, delivery and project management.

Why It Matters

Food has the power to connect people, celebrate culture and strengthen communities.

By bringing together entrepreneurs, growers, producers, hospitality businesses, educators and community partners, The Kitchen Project creates opportunities that extend far beyond the plate. Together, we're building a more connected, resilient and inclusive food ecosystem while supporting local enterprise and creating community wealth across Tāmaki Makaurau.

If your organisation is looking to bring a food-based initiative, event or partnership to life, we'd love to start the conversation.



Contact

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connie.clarkson@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz
021 0271 5803

www.thekitchenproject.co.nz



thekitchenproject.co.nz