

A traditional Māori hāngi, is an excellent method of cooking, whether for a small family gathering in the backyard, a large family celebration, a feast on the marae, or as a fundraising event for the local community. Here at Te Raakaunui Marae near Kāwhia, the laying of a hāngi to be sold at the Kawhia Traditional Maori Kai (food) Festival, is an annual event.

Putting down a hāngi is time-consuming; part of the attraction is how it brings everyone together—all on the marae get involved. The main preparation starts the day before with the digging of the hāngi pit. A fire stack is formed next to the pit using the native manuka wood.

While children run around playing, meat (usually mutton, pork, chicken) is butchered, vegetables (kumara, potato, carrots, and pumpkin) are prepared and put into muslin bags and the much loved pudding made.

The morning of the hāngi is an early one, while still dark the fire is lit, the baskets used to put the food in are sterilised and the collected hāngi stones are placed in the fire to heat up. Once the fire has burnt down, and the stones will be white hot—this can take a good couple of hours—the ash and remaining wood are separated from the stones and the hot stones are then raked into the bottom of the pit and spread out; it is important to ensure all pieces of wood and ash are separated to the side. This is hot work for the men and much care is taken.

Back in the kitchen the prepared food is layered into the baskets and when ready, these are then placed on top of the stones in the pit. The food is completely covered with wet white sheets before several layers of wet hessian are placed on top. More water is sprinkled on, to create the steam, and then the hāngi is sealed with a large sheet of canvas and soil, trapping the steam inside. Juices dripping from the meat fall onto the hot rocks creating more steam during the cooking process, helping to create the unique hāngi flavours. The hāngi will take two-three hours to cook, depending on the size. A good hāngi will produce a succulent feast with a faint smoky flavour.

When ready the pit is uncovered, the hāngi is lifted and taken back to the Marae kitchen for the meat to be sliced the the feast shared.

In New Zealand, marae is the Māori word for the open space in front of the wharenuī or meeting house, however it is also commonly used to refer to the whole complex. A hāngi is the traditional Māori method of cooking food in an earth pit using steam.

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