

# Food Hui Wellington

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In October 2020 I was lucky enough to attend day 2 of the Food Hui held at Te Papa in Wellington. This was presented by The Restaurant Association of NZ and Eat NZ, and was an opportunity for stakeholders across the food industry to gather and talk, listen, and share ideas about the direction of food and hospitality in this country.

As a Food Technology teacher and a passionate foodie, I was excited not only to hear what industry leaders had to say, but also to be rubbing shoulders with a who's who of top chefs and industry leaders. There was a genuine feeling of collaboration, comradeship, and mutual respect among the speakers and attendees, which is probably reflective of our small, tight knit food community here in NZ.

The 5 panels spoke on a wide range of topics: Kaitaki/Young Food Storytellers; Slow Fish; The NZ Grain Industry; A National Food Strategy; and Food Tourism in NZ. Despite the wide range, a clear theme emerged from all of them; that of the disconnection which has occurred between New Zealanders and our food, and the need for consumers to reclaim power in the decision-making processes around it. Several of the speakers had worked in their respective fields overseas, and spoke about the reverence in which artisan food industries are held in other countries, viewed more as an art form than a business. It became clear that here in NZ, while we like to think of ourselves as having close links to the land and being connected with our food sources, in fact most of us have little idea about the provenance of the food on our plates or in our markets.

In the Kaitaki panel of young food storytellers, winemaker Ashleigh Barrowman talked about the ignorance of most kiwis about the high level of chemicals used in winemaking here, while beef farmer Megan Hart shared her desire to close the gap between the consumer and the farmer. Dietician Nickie Hirsthouse explained that for many people there is a real confusion around what a healthy diet looks like, and that the industry seems to be split into 2 camps: nutrition as a science vs food as a pleasure, whereas she believes the two go hand in hand. Pa Shaq explained that manaakitanga (hospitality) is vital to the sharing of food in Aotearoa.

The theme of this disconnect continued in the Slow Fish panel discussion, where small artisan fishers bemoaned the dominance of the big fisheries, and pointed out that it is now a rare thing for consumers to be able to buy fresh fish from the person who caught it, or even be able to trace it. The panel agreed that small scale fishing is the way forward for the industry, but that this requires the consumer to ask questions about the provenance of their fish and to support those artisanal fisheries.

The Local Grain Industry panel, whilst a completely different industry, told a very similar story to the fishers. Local wheat growers talked about being priced out of the market by cheap imported flour, and the fact that most New Zealanders have no idea that almost all the wheat products they buy are made from Australian flour. They felt that if consumers were better informed, they might be more driven to seek out local products and support artisan growers and bakers. Again, they agreed that any change in the industry would need to be consumer-driven.

The discussion about creating a National Food Strategy was a fascinating one; the 5 panellists from very different backgrounds all agreed that we need a unifying document in this country to target the growing disconnection between people and the food they eat. Public Health Physician Boyd Swindburn said "Food has become a commodity to feed people, not nourish them", and the panel touched on the lack of equity and education around food and nutrition. The panel agreed that the way forward for a unified strategy for change was community-driven, and the encouragement of local food ecosystems such as the Food in Schools programme.

Finally, a panel of speakers within the food tourism industry spoke about the need for change in order to encourage tourists to engage more with the food in the areas they are travelling within. They agreed that currently our NZ food

story does not focus on the provenance of local food, and that each area should be telling its own particular story, with links to the local tangata whenua.

Listening to these panels, it is clear that we are facing significant challenges in our food industry here in NZ, compounded by Covid-19 and the lack of international travellers coming to our country. But overwhelmingly the message that came through from every speaker was that of needing to reconnect the consumer with the food they eat. This could be through buying produce directly from the grower/baker/fisher; through encouraging communities to invest in local sustainable food systems; through using an iwi-based approach to marketing local food stories; and through better education and empowerment of all sectors of society. Consumers need to be made aware of the dominance of 'Big Food', and must become empowered to demand change in the system. There are so many passionate people out there driving change towards a more sustainable, more connected food system. It occurred to me that those of us who are educating our tamariki are in a unique position to be able to provide a link between this knowledge and the next generation of food consumers. I came away from the hui feeling a great sense of responsibility as a Food Technology teacher to help effect this change, but also great excitement at the passion, commitment and collaboration that already exists in the food community. "Nau te rourou, naku te rourou, ka ora te manuhiri." – with your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive.