

UN Association Dinner
Botanic Gardens, Wellington – 23 October 2008

United Nations International Year of the potato
Presentation by Dr Nick Roskrug
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Nga Taewa Maori

The taewa or Māori potato is known by a number of generic names which vary according to tribe and dialect around the country; taewa, peruperu [Northland], parareka [Ngāti Porou], mahetau [Ngāi Tahu], rīwai. There are a number of different beliefs regarding the origin of taewa in New Zealand and the route they took to get here. Many Māori believe there were cultivars of taewa here before European explorers such as Cook made contact.

Captain James Cook is credited with the earliest **recorded** introduction of potatoes to New Zealand. On his first voyage and contact in November 1769 he visited Mercury Bay in the Coromandel region. Te Horeta Te Taniwha was a child at the time but his recollections in old age included:

‘Cook then gave two handfuls of potatoes to the old chief [Toiawa], a gift of profound importance to the Māoris. By tradition these potatoes were planted at Hunua where, after cultivation for 3 years, a feast was held and a general distribution made.’ (Begg & Begg, 1969¹)

The tribes of Queen Charlotte Sound make reference to a variety called Te Winiharete which they believe descends from Cook’s introduction. It is generally accepted that taewa were not brought as cargo during the migrations of Māori to Aotearoa/New Zealand but how they arrived is an interesting point. Some believe that chance visits by trading vessels (unrecorded) which had earlier visited South America are responsible for the introduction of taewa. Other tribes hold beliefs that taewa were sourced by their own people from the bush or through other obscure processes. Ngā Rauru of South Taranaki claim the cultivar Tātairongo was obtained from the underworld by their ancestor Te Reke Tātairongo.

Lieutenant King, Governor of Norfolk Island is known to be a catalyst in the introduction of a range of exotic flora and fauna to the northern districts during a visit to New Zealand in 1793. Aside from presents of tools and implements, King is credited with the introduction to that region of the European or ‘white’ potato which is said to have had an immediate influence on the food and diet habits of the local tribes. During the early colonisation period taewa were a key crop in Māori economic development. They provided a marketable product which sold readily and was in continuous demand both in this country and Australia. This intensification of horticultural demand contributed to the large areas brought into production during the rapid colonisation of the nineteenth century

Taewa or Māori potato ultimately replaced (or displaced!) the traditional crops such as kūmara (sweetpotato) and aruhe (fernroot) as the primary carbohydrate and subsistence crop produced by Māori for their own use, some calling it the ‘greatest gift of the European to the Māori agriculturist’. Today taewa are produced using the same processes and technology as commercial potato crops. In the 21st century there is a growing interest in

¹ Begg, A & Begg, N., 1969: *James Cook and New Zealand*, Government Printer, Wellington.

some of these old and integral crops. The discerning shopper has created a demand for specific varieties of taewa, generally due to their cooking, taste and texture qualities.

We currently have a seed bank project at Massey University which maintains around 20 varieties of taewa each season. The excess seed produced is distributed annually to marae and hapu/whanau (family and tribal groups). Part of the project is also looking at commercial opportunity and we have identified 4 varieties which appear to be the most suited to commercial systems and have gained interest from consumers, restaurants, tourism interests and so on. They are:

Tutaekuri: purple skin and flesh – cooks very quickly, floury texture

Karuparera: distinctive skin pattern, waxy flesh and boils very well



Moemoe: the name refers to its keeping qualities (sleeper), floury texture

Huakaroro: yellow skin and flesh, waxy texture, very good boiling



Our recipe (Tahuri Whenua)

250gms each Tutaekuri and Huakaroro, washed and cut into bite sized pieces

Salt and pepper to taste

Small bunch of puha or watercress blended/juiced

200gm sour cream – add blended puha to this as a dip for the chips.

SERVE



*Nga Mihi Atu
Nick Roskruge*