Rēwena and Rabbit Stew: The Rural Kitchen in Aotearoa, 1800-1940.
By Katie Cooper.
Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2024.
RRP: $49.99, ISBN: 9781776711116.
Reviewed by Duncan Galletly.

Attempting to describe, in detail, the rural kitchen of Aotearoa, is an almost impossible task. Of mosaic complexity, even the definitions of "kitchen" and "rural" are blurry, at best. No two kitchens are identical – each is influenced by its purpose, culture, time, gender, affluence, geography, available construction materials, whether farm or industry, and a host of factors relating to rural infrastructure and foodways. While many "fine-grained" analyses have explored specific details of Māori and Pākehā rural and culinary life, and Helen Leach's *Kitchens* gives us a brilliantly detailed historical description of the physical kitchen and its appliances, *Rēwena Bread and Rabbit Stew* is an exceptional and broad social exploration of the kitchen in Aotearoa's rural landscape. Alongside Leach's work, Katie Cooper adds the human element, seeing the kitchen, "not as a fixed space but as the centre of a range of processes and networks; the point of convergence for a whole host of people and goods." Using this idea of the kitchen as a hub, she follows the radiating spokes to explore a range of important social, cultural, culinary, demographic and economic associations, and, in doing so, reveals many untapped seams of unknowns, each the springboard for future exploration. By raising as many questions as it answers, this is an important piece of foundational research.

Using memoirs, autobiographies, private manuscripts, journals, diaries, oral histories, Waitangi tribunal submissions, and print media, Cooper uncovers the oft forgotten voices and stories of nineteenth and early twentieth century rural women and men, and uses these as the scaffolding for her work. Although the book began life as a doctoral thesis, and the list of references and sources is extensive, these rural voices drown out any arcane academic exposition, statistical analysis is minimal, all of which making the book highly approachable for the general reader. The many, rarely reproduced, illustrations are perfectly matched to the text. The type and layout are excellent, with the odd, interesting, digression, set aside on greyed paper and sans-serif type.

To make the task manageable, Cooper considers five key aspects of the rural kitchen; *architecture*, the built structures and enclosures of Māori and Pākehā food preparation areas; *technology* – the modes of cooking, from hāngi, open fires, camp ovens and coal range, to the thermostatically controlled electric ovens made available by an expanding national grid; *provisioning* – the gathering, hunting, bartering and purchase of food in the rural environment; *women's role* in the rural kitchen – how rural women saw themselves and their lot; and, finally in "Hākari, feasts and picnics", she explores aspects of *manaakitanga* – how sharing and hospitality was an important part of rural life, not only relevant to Māori culture, but also to Pākehā living in isolation, and feeding travellers, itinerant workers and farmhands.

Much of the ground is covered methodically in a carefully researched manner, but as she weaves the Pākehā view of the kitchen with that of Māori, Cooper gives the reader an appreciation of how Māori were channelled by exposure, expectation and Government legislation, into accepting the colonial, western, view of kitchen and "home". Virtually in all aspects of domestic life, Māori were encouraged to abandon long held beliefs and ways, and to adopt the expectations of Mrs Beeton's Britain.

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS39 (2025), 123-125 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS39.9904

In pre-colonial Aotearoa, Māori living spaces had been physically separated from the shelter used for cooking – the kāuta, and food storage – the whata. This came about through belief in tapu, as well as the ever-present risk of fire in highly inflammable raupō and wooden structures. Early European arrivals, at first, built simple, single room, structures in which living and cooking spaces were merged – many of which burned to the ground. Later, as more elaborate two or more room bungalows and villas were built, individual rooms took on specific purposes – kitchen, parlour, bedrooms etc – according to western concepts of what was proper. Under the guise of safety, sanitation and progress, Māori were encouraged to adopt this western architecture, with Maui Pomare of the Māori Section of the Department of Public Health, advocating western style housing for all Māori, and describing kāuta as "veritable death traps". But colonial domestic architecture failed to take into account, not only tapu, but also Māori social structure, and manaakitanga, with the need to accommodate and feed visitors and extended whanau. While marae architecture did incorporate some colonial concepts, "hybrid" housing that attempted to marry Pākehā and Māori ideals were promoted. Thus the Tairawhiti district Public Works Office developed house plans – based on resident's wishes – without scullery, wash-house or built-in wardrobes, in favour of additional bedrooms.

Alongside this architectural division, is the more metaphysical and philosophical divide over the concept of "home", which in the Pākehā world is fixated on the house, but in the Māori world has much wider meaning, encompassing land, marae and whakapapa.

Warren Tiwini of Motueka is used as an example of Māori who straddled two worlds "… he was Māori … spoke te reo, gathered food from the landscape … However, the social pressure Warren faced to be like his Pākehā neighbours must have been intense, for he never spoke Māori in front of his children … He did, however, continue to gather customary foods, despite facing ridicule from others in the community" (p. 142).

The same dilemma was faced by wahine Māori. Their original, te ao Māori, lives had been those of "child bearers, lovers, writers of waiata, holders of whakapapa, te whare tapere performers [and a] means of procreation and tribal continuity" (p. 184). They "privileged the collective over the individual", and child rearing had been a shared task with whanau. The western expectation however was that they take on the mantle of the "stay at home mother", within a Christianised nuclear "homemaker model", – a solitary "drudge".

While Cooper discusses the weak intersection of Pākehā and Māori networks within the community – each "lonely in one another's company", she also details the hierarchical class separation at the Pākehā dinner table. Some affluent runholders, with large estates and many servants and farmhands, attempted to reconstruct a semblance of British aristocracy, while others did not. Some ate together – the one table arrangement – while others ate separately – the two table arrangement. We learn that Sarah Courage and her husband, at Waipara Station in the 1860s, and following accepted Mrs Beeton-esque instruction, never considered sitting down to a meal with the servants and was "baffled when she discovered during a visit to her neighbour Mrs Iscariot's house, that others in their position did" (p. 237).

Although the scope of *Rēwena Bread and Rabbit Stew* is large, there are, understandably, many aspects of the rural kitchen that are touched on very lightly, or not at all, as Katie freely acknowledges. Examples might include how cooking methods influenced the built structure; how Māori adopted, or adapted, western cooking methods; the importance of lighting technology, from candles to paraffin lamps to the lightbulb, in determining the use of spaces within the dwelling and its circadian dining patterns – when did rural people eat? It would be

interesting to know also, for both Pākehā and Māori, how geography and climate influenced kitchen structures across Aotearoa; how isolation was tempered by various forms of transport, roading and an expanding rail network; how provisions were delivered by distant suppliers; the spatial distribution of food suppliers in rural areas, the country store and the rural pub; the importance of radio and telephone, and the detailed relevance of networks such as the Māori Women's League, the Farmers and Country Women's Institutes, and the various agricultural shows, with competitions for baking and preserves.

Despite any limitations, however, Katie Cooper has produced an important foundational document on New Zealand rural society and its foodways. The book is a generous gift for students and future researchers, it is highly recommended for general readership, and especially for those seeking to understand the effects of rural colonialisation in Aotearoa.

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS39 (2025), 123-125 https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS39.9904