

Media Release

Hāngi inspires return to Aotearoa for chef behind Japanese Michelin-starred restaurant

Wellington, 23 June 2026 - A hāngi experienced as a teenager in New Zealand is bringing Michelin-starred Japanese chef Keiko Kuwakino back to Aotearoa for Visa Wellington On a Plate 2026.

This August, Kuwakino will return to New Zealand for the first time since visiting as a high school exchange student, joining acclaimed Māori chef Joe McLeod for a special dinner celebrating the connections between Japanese and Māori food traditions at Pipitea Marae on 29 August.

McLeod is known for his work championing indigenous ingredients, mātauranga Māori and the passing of cultural knowledge through food. Keiko Kuwakino is head chef at Niigata's Sanaburi restaurant, which holds one Michelin star, and is famous for its plant-forward 'satoyama' (mountain-to-table) cuisine. She says her first visit to New Zealand quietly shaped who she is today.

"During my stay, I was invited to share a hāngi. I still remember the smell of the forest, the warmth of the earth, and the generosity of the people who spent so much time preparing food to welcome us. Even now, that memory remains vivid and full of warmth."

At the time, Kuwakino never imagined she would become a chef. Today, her cooking draws on wild mountain vegetables, seasonal plants and traditional food knowledge deeply connected to place and nature. She says the experience of Māori hospitality continues to resonate through her work.

"I cook in the mountains of Niigata, a region where many Jomon archaeological sites remain. There is evidence that people here also cooked using underground pits, and from time to time, we recreate those ancient techniques ourselves. Whenever I do, I find myself thinking back to that experience in New Zealand.

"It reminds me that even across different histories, cultures and peoples, there are shared ways of understanding food, nature and community. It makes me reflect on how food cultures develop and how human beings have learned from the land throughout history."

Developed in partnership with Te Āti Awa and E Kai Māori, the one-off dinner celebrates the deep connections between Māori and Japanese food traditions. McLeod and Kuwakino share philosophies about passing down knowledge of ingredients and foraging to future generations, as well as the importance of connecting with the land through their food.

Kura Moeahu of Te Āti Awa says the event is about much more than bringing two chefs together.

"Food is one of the most powerful ways we share who we are. It carries our stories, our connection to place, our values and the knowledge passed down through generations.

"We're honoured to welcome Chef Keiko Kuwakino to Pipitea Marae for this Indigenous Culinary Exchange. While our cultures come from different parts of the world, Māori and Japanese traditions share a deep respect for people, the environment and the role food plays in bringing communities together.

"This event is an opportunity to build genuine relationships through kai, celebrate indigenous excellence, and create an experience where people leave with a deeper understanding of the stories, traditions and values that sit behind every dish."

The event is being supported by the Government's Events Boost Fund. Tourism and Hospitality Minister Louise Upston says it demonstrates the unique experiences that help attract visitors while showcasing New

Zealand's cultural heritage.

“Events like this deliver a distinctive visitor experience by showcasing our cultural heritage and strengthening our reputation as a world-class food destination. That's why we're supporting this event through the New Zealand Government's Events Boost Fund.”

Visa Wellington On a Plate Festival Director Beth Brash says the event carries special meaning after spending a year living and working in Japan as an English teacher.

“That experience gave me a deep appreciation for Japanese culture and the role food plays in connecting people to place, history and community. To have someone who experienced Māori hospitality as a young exchange student return decades later as one of Japan's most celebrated chefs is a remarkable full-circle moment.

“It also speaks beautifully to this year's theme, Word of Mouth. Food traditions travel through stories, through people and through the experiences we carry with us.”

Returning to New Zealand after so many years, Kuwakino hopes the experience will leave a legacy beyond a single evening.

“More than anything, I am looking forward to listening and learning. Returning to New Zealand after so many years feels very special. The country left a deep impression on me when I was young, and I am grateful for the opportunity to return at a very different stage of life. I hope this experience becomes not just a dinner, but the beginning of a long-term relationship and cultural exchange between our communities.”

Visa Wellington On a Plate runs throughout August 2026. The full programme for this year's festival, featuring more than 100 events and over 240 burgers across the region, is available now at visawoap.com.

Tickets and programme information are available [here](#).

- Visa pre-sale: Begins 12pm, 22 June and runs until midnight 24 June
- General public tickets: On sale from 12pm, 29 June
- Full programme: visawoap.com

About Visa Wellington On a Plate

Visa Wellington On a Plate is brought to you by the Wellington Culinary Events Trust, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting our local hospitality and national brewing industries. It's one of the southern hemisphere's most significant and boldest food festivals. From burgers and cocktails to chef collaborations and immersive experiences, it showcases the best of the Wellington region's producers, venues, and creative talent, and is dedicated to supporting and celebrating the capital's hospitality industry.

Visa Wellington On a Plate is proudly supported by the New Zealand Government's Events Boost Fund
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For more information, please contact

Hannah Palframan, Public Relations | +642041009362 | hannah@thornpr.co
Jacinda Thorn, Public Relations | +61430620616 | jacinda@thornpr.co