



The Māori Queen led a Kiingitanga delegation to the United Arab Emirates recently, supporting the work of Māori Kiwifruit Growers Ltd

ORIGIN STORIES MULTIPLY CONSUMER INTEREST

New research is showing the growing interest in food origin stories and how this is gaining growing sway with global consumers. Māori Kiwifruit Growers (MKGL) was part of a recent trade delegation in Dubai, making successful connections with key industry players through sharing its Māori brand origin story.

Helena O'Neill

Māori Kiwifruit Growers chair Geoff Rolleston says brand origin stories are another way of promoting New Zealand.

"Everyone seems to benefit, not just kiwifruit, and not just Māori growers. It's apples, it's the country's industry as a whole. It's got a broad appeal and is particularly good for all growers because ultimately it's going to boost sales, and hey, that's what we're after."

In 2023, Māori kiwifruit growers exported their first shipment of kiwifruit to Hawai'i and became the sole suppliers to the Hawaiian market.

"When we started in Hawai'i, it was almost a natural thing for us to do, because the Hawaiians and Māori



we've got a cultural connection. We just hit it off with our Hawaiian distributors, starting with a small number of containers initially, but we were able to build that. So immediately we saw a potential, and that opportunity in Hawai'i translated into a bigger revenue than we anticipated."

Securing a foothold in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) market was more challenging, Geoff says. MKGL has partnered with fruit exporters Mr Apple and Zespri to launch kiwifruit grown by New Zealand orchards.

It's a good example of increasing Māori trade through leverage of international arrangements and trade agreements - one of the outcomes in the *Aotearoa Horticulture Action Plan*.

The Māori Queen, Te Arikinui Kuini Nga wai hono i te po VIII, led a Kīngitanga delegation in Dubai in early October.

"One thing I must acknowledge is that the presence of the Māori Queen at our Dubai launch was a real game-changer. In terms of opening other doors, being the Māori Queen, the royal-to-royal connection was just huge," Geoff says.

"I think the way we interact with people is a little bit different. We are quite social by nature, and I think our approach is a bit more simple; not so transactional at the point of engagement, that comes later. The thing is to just really open that door, set a scene more or less, and we do it through waiata (song). Everybody we've met in the UAE, we've done a bit of a kōrero (conversation) with them, and then we all sing after it. They absolutely love that, and that's breaking down barriers."

He says having a Māori brand origin story allows growers to demonstrate a point of difference in the marketing and allows connections with consumers.



...the royal-to-royal connection was just huge

"We want to promote ourselves as a good collaborative marketer in other regions. We want to expand our reach. We're utilising our points of difference in our promotions and marketing to ultimately sell more fruit for all, and the benefits are for the whole industry. It's for every grower in this sector. It's not just for Māori growers, it's for all of us.

Collaborative marketing and reinvestment

Under a collaborative marketing deal with Zespri, MKGL will earn a fee for marketing 10 containers of fruit in the UAE in partnership with established New Zealand fruit exporter Mr Apple. MKGL's fee will be reinvested into training and capability-building for Māori growers in the horticulture heartland of rural New Zealand.

"We're not just marketing fruit," Geoff says. "We're building futures. It's about collaborating to create long-term relationships and intergenerational prosperity."

He says the Māori economy is built on an intergenerational outlook. In kiwifruit, multi-owner Māori orchards plough profits into health, education and economic development for owners and their descendants.

Developing a brand origin story

Last year, the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) released a report, *Māori Brand Origin Stories*, exploring consumer demand opportunities for Māori brands.

MPI manager of data insights Grant Bell says research shows Māori growers have a genuine opportunity to unlock significant export demand through authentic, consumer-aligned origin stories.

The research identified a group of consumers (called cultural consumers) who have a high interest in authentic cultural origins, which influences their decisions on food and drink purchases. People in this group tend to be younger (25–44 years) and have slightly higher disposable incomes.

"China alone has an estimated 394 million cultural consumers, the US has 57 million, Japan has 26 million, the UK has 11 million, and Australia has 5.4 million."



New Zealand apples and kiwifruit for sale in Dubai under a collaborative marketing deal with Zespri and Mr Apple





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Kiwifruit for sale in Hawai'i through a collaboration of Māori Kiwifruit Growers and Zespri

"New Zealand has a strong reputation for producing high-quality food and drink, but we're competing against countries like France, Italy and Japan with centuries-old food stories. Māori origin stories give our growers a unique cultural narrative that is difficult to replicate."



'Being Māori' alone isn't enough - you need to communicate what that means in ways consumers can understand and value

But while there are significant opportunities for Māori brands, the research showed overseas consumers don't know a lot about Māori culture.

"Another challenge is communicating the value of Māori culture to cultural consumers in a way that's simple and resonates with them. Māori values like manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and kaitiakitanga are rich and meaningful, but they can be difficult to explain quickly to consumers without prior knowledge."

Grant notes it's important that origin stories don't replace fundamental requirements - products still need to taste great, be competitively priced and meet quality standards. "An origin story on a poor product won't succeed."

Multiplying consumer interest

While fresh produce can seem interchangeable to consumers, origin stories give products personality and identity, which resonates with consumers and makes them memorable.



Māori origin stories give our growers a unique cultural narrative that is difficult to replicate

When consumers understand the cultural values behind production, they're more likely to believe claims about quality, sustainability and authenticity.

"Origin stories must genuinely reflect the business's cultural values and practices. This is important in the social media age, where consumers increasingly scrutinise brand claims, and inauthentic stories risk backlash that can significantly erode business value and sometimes business survival."

Origin stories can work across different ownership structures. Whether fully Māori-owned, in partnership, or Māori suppliers to larger organisations, the focus should be on authentic cultural values in production and business practices rather than just ownership percentage.

Grant says the most unexpected finding was the limited interest consumers showed in Māori products without an origin story to provide context. He says 58 percent of cultural consumers want to try Māori products when they're presented with an effective origin story, compared to just 12 percent without one.

"This underscored that 'being Māori' alone isn't enough - you need to communicate what that means in ways consumers can understand and value. We anticipated origin stories would help pique consumer interest in products, but the scale was higher than we expected. Effective origin stories multiplied interest by four to five times." ●



Visit the Ministry for Primary Industries website or follow the QR code to download the Māori Brand Origin Stories report.

