



EATING WELL IN NZ

Local Foods, Cultural Diversity & Practical Nutrition Advice

Written by

NM Nutrition

Associate Registered Nutritionist
Nutrition Society of New Zealand

nmfoodsciencenutrition.com

[YouTube: nmfoodscience](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnmfoodscience)

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Important Disclaimer

This eBook is written by an Associate Registered Nutritionist (ARNutritionist) with the Nutrition Society of New Zealand and is intended for general educational purposes only.

The information provided in this book is based on current general nutrition evidence and New Zealand food guidelines. It is not intended to replace personalised nutrition advice, medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you have a specific health condition, chronic disease, or require individual dietary management, please consult a Registered Dietitian or your healthcare provider.

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1. Introduction

New Zealand is a unique place to eat. It is a country shaped by Maori tradition, Pacific Island heritage, European settlement, and waves of Asian migration. The result is one of the most diverse food cultures in the Southern Hemisphere.

Yet despite this richness, many New Zealanders find it difficult to know what “eating well” actually looks like in a local context. Most nutrition information available online is written for North American or European audiences, uses ingredients we don’t recognise, and ignores the beautiful seasonal and cultural foods available right here.

This eBook is written specifically for people living in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a practical, evidence-informed guide to eating well using local foods, understanding our food environment, and appreciating the incredible diversity of cuisines that make up the Kiwi table.

It has been written by NM Nutrition, an Associate Registered Nutritionist with the Nutrition Society of New Zealand. This book covers general healthy eating guidance aligned with the New Zealand Ministry of Health guidelines [1] and the Heart Foundation of New Zealand [2].

About NM Nutrition

NM Nutrition provides evidence-based nutrition consultancy and food science education for New Zealanders. Visit nmfoodsciencenutrition.com for personalised support, or subscribe to the YouTube channel at youtube.com/@nmfoodscience for free weekly nutrition content.

2. The NZ Food Environment

Understanding your food environment is the first step to making better choices. In New Zealand, our food landscape includes supermarkets, farmers markets, Asian grocery stores, convenience stores, takeaway outlets, and increasingly, online food delivery services.

2.1 Supermarkets

Supermarkets are the primary food source for most New Zealanders, with Countdown (now Woolworths NZ) and Foodstuffs (New World, Pak'nSave, Four Square) dominating the market [3]. While supermarkets offer convenience and variety, they are also designed to encourage impulse purchasing. Here are some practical tips:

- Shop the perimeter first – fresh produce, dairy, meat, and seafood are usually located around the edges.
- Do not shop hungry – research consistently shows hungry shoppers spend more and choose less nutritious foods [4].
- Compare unit prices, not package prices – larger sizes are not always better value.
- Check the Health Star Rating on packaged foods (see Chapter 6 for more detail).

2.2 Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are a fantastic way to access fresh, seasonal, locally grown produce. New Zealand has a thriving farmers market scene, from Auckland's La Cigale market to Wellington's Harbourside Market and the Christchurch Farmers' Market [5].


Benefits of shopping at farmers markets include:

- Produce is typically harvested closer to sale, meaning higher nutrient content in some cases.
- You support local growers and reduce food miles.
- You can discover heritage vegetables, local honey, artisan cheeses, and seasonal specialties.

2.3 Eating Seasonally in NZ

New Zealand's temperate climate means excellent seasonal produce year-round. Eating seasonally tends to be more affordable, fresher, and more nutritious. General seasonal guides for NZ include [6]:

- Summer (Dec–Feb): Tomatoes, courgettes, stone fruits, berries, corn, capsicum
- Autumn (Mar–May): Apples, pears, pumpkin, kumara, feijoas, avocado
- Winter (Jun–Aug): Kale, silverbeet, broccoli, cauliflower, leeks, citrus
- Spring (Sep–Nov): Asparagus, new potatoes, peas, spinach, strawberries

 **NM Nutrition Tip**

For seasonal produce guides and food science explainers, check out the NM Nutrition YouTube channel: youtube.com/@nmfoodscience

3. Traditional Maori Kai

Maori food culture, or kai, is deeply intertwined with the land, sea, and the concept of kaitiakitanga – guardianship of the environment. Traditional Maori cuisine predates European arrival and draws on the rich natural resources of Aotearoa.

3.1 Key Traditional Foods

Kumara (Sweet Potato)

Kumara is one of the most important foods in Maori culture, introduced to Aotearoa by Polynesian navigators [7]. It is a nutritious root vegetable rich in:

- Complex carbohydrates for sustained energy
- Vitamin A (from beta-carotene in orange varieties)
- Vitamin C, potassium, and fibre

Kumara can be roasted, steamed, mashed, or used in soups. It is a versatile and affordable staple available year-round in NZ supermarkets and markets.

Seafood

New Zealand's coastline provides exceptional seafood that has been central to Maori diet for centuries. Key traditional seafood includes:

- Paua (abalone) – a source of lean protein and iron
- Kina (sea urchin) – rich in protein and omega-3 fatty acids
- Koura (freshwater crayfish) – lean protein
- Hapuku (groper) and snapper – excellent sources of lean protein and omega-3s
- Pipi and tuatua (shellfish) – rich in zinc, iron, and B12

Including seafood regularly in the diet is consistent with evidence-based healthy eating patterns and is encouraged by both the NZ Ministry of Health and Heart Foundation [1][2].

Hangi

The hangi is a traditional Maori cooking method using heated stones buried in the ground. It is used for special occasions and gatherings (hui). Typical hangi foods include kumara, potato, pumpkin, chicken, pork, and lamb – all slow-cooked together, producing tender, naturally flavoured food with minimal need for added fats or salt.

Native Plants

Several native NZ plants have nutritional and culinary value, though many are less widely used today:

- Kawakawa – used as a medicinal herb and increasingly appearing in teas and modern cuisine
- Puha (sow thistle) – a leafy green rich in vitamins, traditionally eaten with boil-up
- Pikopiko (fern shoots) – used as a vegetable, similar to asparagus
- Horopito – a native pepper with antioxidant properties

3.2 Boil-Up

Boil-up is a traditional Maori dish made with pork bones, root vegetables (kumara, potato), and greens such as puha or watercress. It is a comforting, hearty meal that can be a nutritious option, particularly when made with lean cuts of meat and plenty of vegetables.

Did You Know?

Kumara has been grown in New Zealand for over 700 years. It is one of the few staple crops successfully introduced to Aotearoa by early Polynesian settlers. Learn more food science facts at youtube.com/@nmfoodscience

4. Pacific Island Foods

New Zealand is home to one of the largest Pacific Island communities in the world, with significant populations of Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Maori, Niuean, and Fijian descent [8]. Pacific food culture is rich, communal, and deeply rooted in tradition.

4.1 Key Pacific Island Foods

Taro

Taro is a starchy root vegetable that is a dietary staple across Polynesia. Nutritionally, taro provides:

- Good source of complex carbohydrates and dietary fibre
- Potassium – important for heart health
- Vitamin E and B6
- Some calcium and magnesium

Taro must be cooked before eating, as raw taro contains calcium oxalate crystals which can cause irritation. It can be boiled, steamed, roasted, or made into poi (a fermented paste).

Coconut

Coconut is used extensively in Pacific cooking, both as coconut cream and fresh coconut flesh. While coconut cream is high in saturated fat, it is used in moderate amounts as part of traditional cultural cooking and provides flavour, energy, and some minerals including manganese and copper.

Coconut is best enjoyed as part of a varied diet rather than in large daily quantities, particularly for those managing cardiovascular risk. For individual guidance, speak with a Registered Dietitian.

Breadfruit (Ulu)

Breadfruit is a starchy fruit used as a vegetable in Pacific cooking. It is a good source of:

- Complex carbohydrates
- Dietary fibre
- Vitamin C
- Potassium

Breadfruit can be boiled, baked, fried, or fermented. It is available in some Pacific and Asian grocery stores in NZ.

Cassava (Tapioca)

Cassava is another root vegetable commonly used across Pacific and Asian communities in NZ. It is primarily a source of energy (carbohydrates) and should always be properly cooked to remove naturally occurring compounds. Pairing cassava with protein and vegetables helps create a more balanced meal.

4.2 Pacific Food Culture & Nutrition

Traditional Pacific diets, before the influence of processed foods, were rich in fresh fish, root vegetables, fruits, and coconut – a pattern that aligns well with healthy eating principles. However, urbanisation and the increased availability of cheap, energy-dense processed foods have contributed to higher rates of diet-related chronic disease in Pacific communities in NZ [9].

Celebrating and returning to traditional Pacific food roots, while adapting to a NZ food environment, can support better health outcomes. Community-based nutrition programmes in NZ are working toward this goal [9].

Cultural Tip

When eating traditional Pacific foods at family gatherings or community events, focus on portions, variety, and balance. Traditional Pacific root vegetables and seafood are nutritious choices. Enjoy the cultural connection food brings.

5. Asian & Multicultural NZ

New Zealand's Asian population is one of the fastest growing demographics, with significant Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, and Southeast Asian communities [8]. This cultural richness has transformed the NZ food landscape, giving all New Zealanders access to an extraordinary range of nutritious ingredients and culinary traditions.

5.1 East Asian Foods

East Asian cuisines (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) commonly feature:

- Rice and noodles as staple carbohydrates
- Fermented foods such as kimchi, miso, and soy sauce – sources of beneficial bacteria and B vitamins
- Tofu and edamame – plant-based protein sources
- Seaweed – rich in iodine, important for thyroid health
- Fish and shellfish – lean protein and omega-3 fatty acids

Many East Asian cooking techniques such as steaming, stir-frying, and poaching are lower-fat methods that preserve nutrients well.

5.2 South Asian Foods

Indian and South Asian cuisines are rich in plant-based proteins, aromatic spices, and vegetables. Key nutritional features include:

- Legumes (lentils, chickpeas, dal) – excellent sources of plant protein, fibre, and iron
- Spices such as turmeric, cumin, and coriander – contain bioactive compounds with antioxidant properties
- Yoghurt – a source of calcium, protein, and probiotics
- Whole grain options such as roti and brown rice

Traditional South Asian vegetarian and plant-forward diets align closely with healthy eating recommendations and are growing in popularity across NZ.

5.3 Southeast Asian Foods

Thai, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Malaysian cuisines are widely available across NZ. These cuisines often feature:

- Fresh herbs (coriander, mint, Thai basil) – flavour with minimal calories
- Rice paper, rice noodles – lighter carbohydrate options
- Fish sauce and shrimp paste – flavour bases that are high in sodium; use sparingly
- Fresh lime, lemongrass, and chilli – natural flavour enhancers

5.4 Finding Diverse Ingredients in NZ

Most NZ cities and towns have at least one Asian grocery store where you can find a wide range of affordable ingredients including tofu, miso paste, noodles, coconut milk, taro, lemongrass, pandan leaves, and fermented foods. Many of these ingredients are nutritious, affordable, and versatile.

NM Nutrition Tip

Exploring different cultural cuisines is one of the best ways to naturally diversify your diet and increase the variety of nutrients you consume. Try incorporating one new ingredient from a different cuisine each week.

6. Reading NZ Food Labels

New Zealand has specific food labelling regulations governed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) [10]. Understanding food labels empowers you to make more informed choices at the supermarket.

6.1 The Health Star Rating

The Health Star Rating (HSR) system is a voluntary front-of-pack labelling system used in New Zealand and Australia. It rates packaged foods from 0.5 to 5 stars based on their nutrient profile – with 5 stars being the healthiest option [11].

The HSR system considers:

- Nutrients to limit: energy (kilojoules), saturated fat, sodium (salt), and total sugar
- Positive components: protein, fibre, and proportion of fruit, vegetables, nuts, and legumes

While HSR is a useful quick guide, it only applies to the same food category. A 5-star breakfast cereal is healthier than a 2-star breakfast cereal, but you cannot directly compare a cereal to fresh fruit using this system.

6.2 The Nutrition Information Panel (NIP)

The Nutrition Information Panel (NIP) is mandatory on all packaged foods in NZ [10]. It shows nutritional content per serve and per 100g. When comparing two products, always use the per 100g column.

Key things to look for on the NIP:

- Saturated fat – aim for less than 3g per 100g where possible
- Sodium – aim for less than 400mg per 100g; less than 120mg per 100g is excellent [2]
- Total sugar – check whether sugars come from added sugar or natural sources (e.g. fruit, dairy)
- Fibre – aim for products with at least 3g per serve

6.3 Ingredients List

Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight – the first ingredient listed is present in the greatest amount. If sugar, refined flour, or oil appears in the first two or three ingredients, this is worth noting.

Common ingredients to be aware of:

- Added sugars go by many names: glucose, fructose, maltose, dextrose, corn syrup, rice syrup, agave

- Sodium sources include: salt, monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium bicarbonate, soy sauce
- Vegetable oils listed without specification (e.g. “vegetable oil”) may be palm oil in some products

6.4 Nutrition and Health Claims

Packaged foods can make nutrition content claims (e.g. “low fat”, “high fibre”) and health claims (e.g. “calcium supports bone health”). These claims are regulated by FSANZ and must meet specific criteria to be used [10].

However, a health claim on a product does not mean the overall product is a healthy choice. Always check the NIP alongside any front-of-pack claims.

Label Reading Tip

For in-depth food label explainers and ingredient breakdowns, visit the NM Nutrition YouTube channel: youtube.com/@nmfoodscience. New videos covering NZ-specific food products are published regularly.

7. Eating Well on a Budget in NZ

Eating well does not have to be expensive. With food costs rising across New Zealand [12], practical budgeting strategies are more important than ever. The following guidance is designed to help you eat nutritiously without breaking the bank.

7.1 Budget-Friendly Protein Sources

Protein is often one of the most expensive components of a meal. Here are affordable high-protein options available in NZ:

- Canned legumes (chickpeas, lentils, kidney beans) – typically under \$2 per can, high in protein and fibre
- Eggs – one of the most nutrient-dense and affordable foods available
- Canned tuna or salmon – convenient, affordable, and rich in omega-3s
- Tofu – widely available in NZ supermarkets and Asian grocery stores, excellent value
- Frozen fish fillets – often more affordable than fresh, with comparable nutritional value
- Chicken thighs (bone-in) – significantly cheaper than breast and very flavoursome

7.2 Budget-Friendly Carbohydrates

- Rolled oats – affordable, versatile, and a great source of beta-glucan fibre
- Brown or white rice – buy in bulk for better value
- Pasta (wholegrain where possible)
- Bread – look for wholegrain or wholemeal options
- Kumara and potato – affordable, filling, and nutrient-rich

7.3 Making the Most of Vegetables

- Frozen vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh and are often more affordable [4]
- Buy seasonal produce – it is cheaper and fresher (see Chapter 2)
- Reduce food waste by using vegetable scraps in soups or stocks
- Pak'nSave generally offers the lowest everyday prices for staple produce in NZ [3]

7.4 Meal Planning Tips

- Plan your meals for the week before shopping – reduces impulse buying and food waste
- Cook once, eat twice – batch cook grains, legumes, or soups for multiple meals
- Keep a well-stocked pantry with staples: canned tomatoes, lentils, oats, soy sauce, olive oil, spices

- Check your fridge and pantry before shopping to avoid buying duplicates

 **Budget Tip**

A simple, nutritious, and affordable NZ meal: brown rice + canned lentils + frozen mixed vegetables + a fried egg + soy sauce. This costs under \$3 per serve and provides carbohydrates, protein, fibre, and micronutrients.

8. Simple Meal Ideas Using Local NZ Ingredients

The following meal ideas use affordable, locally available NZ ingredients. These are general ideas for healthy adults and are not intended as prescribed meal plans. For personalised meal planning, consult NM Nutrition at nmfoodsciencenutrition.com.

Breakfast Ideas

- Rolled oat porridge with sliced feijoa (autumn), topped with a spoonful of NZ manuka honey
- Scrambled eggs on wholegrain toast with sliced avocado and a squeeze of lemon
- Homemade muesli with rolled oats, sunflower seeds, dried apricot, and NZ yoghurt
- Smoothie with frozen berries, banana, NZ milk or yoghurt, and a tablespoon of nut butter

Lunch Ideas

- Brown rice salad with roasted kumara, chickpeas, spinach, and tahini dressing
- Wholegrain wrap with canned tuna, avocado, mixed greens, and lemon juice
- Homemade lentil soup with seasonal root vegetables and crusty wholegrain bread
- Tofu and vegetable stir-fry with soba noodles and tamari

Dinner Ideas

- Hangi-inspired baked chicken thighs with kumara, pumpkin, and silverbeet
- Dal (red lentil curry) with brown rice and yoghurt raita – budget-friendly and nutrient-dense
- Baked snapper fillet with roasted seasonal vegetables and lemon
- Vegetable frittata with eggs, courgette, red onion, and feta – great for using up leftover vegetables
- Pacific-inspired coconut fish curry with taro and bok choy

Snack Ideas

- Fresh seasonal fruit (feijoa, apple, pear, berries)
- Carrot and celery sticks with hummus
- A small handful of mixed nuts and dried fruit
- NZ yoghurt with a drizzle of honey
- Wholegrain crackers with avocado or nut butter

Recipe Videos

For step-by-step recipe ideas using NZ ingredients, visit the NM Nutrition YouTube channel: youtube.com/@nmfoodscience. New content is published regularly featuring local, seasonal, and culturally diverse New Zealand recipes.

9. Conclusion

Eating well in New Zealand is about more than following a diet. It is about connecting with the food culture of this beautiful country, celebrating the diversity of the people who call Aotearoa home, and making practical, evidence-informed choices that support long-term wellbeing.

Key takeaways from this eBook:

- Explore your local food environment – farmers markets, Asian grocery stores, and seasonal produce are fantastic resources.
- Traditional Maori kai and Pacific Island foods have deep nutritional and cultural value – celebrate and include them.
- New Zealand’s multicultural food scene offers extraordinary nutritional diversity – embrace it.
- Read food labels – the NIP and Health Star Rating are tools to help you make informed choices.
- Eating well on a budget is achievable – legumes, eggs, frozen vegetables, and seasonal produce are your best friends.
- Simple, locally inspired meals do not need to be complicated to be nutritious.

Remember: general healthy eating guidance is a great starting point, but individual nutrition needs vary. If you have a health condition or want tailored support, please see a Registered Dietitian or qualified nutrition professional.

For more NZ nutrition content, free resources, and to work with NM Nutrition:

Website: nmfoodsciencenutrition.com

YouTube: youtube.com/@nmfoodscience

Kia ora, and eat well!

References

All references are provided in accordance with general evidence-based nutrition practice. NM Nutrition acknowledges these sources as foundational guidance for this publication.

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