



# Home grown

Sometimes tough situations can be the push we need to pursue our passions. This Auckland Trio have combined their strengths to bring a taste of Māori and Polynesian culture to little ones' plates

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PHOTOGRAPHY THESE ARE THE GOLDEN DAYS



The last few years have been tough on everyone, but there are unexpected blessings. One of those stories is Yawye, a company that was born during the pandemic. Yawye (You Are What You Eat) is a subscription service that offers nutritious, indigenous meals for Auckland babies and toddlers.

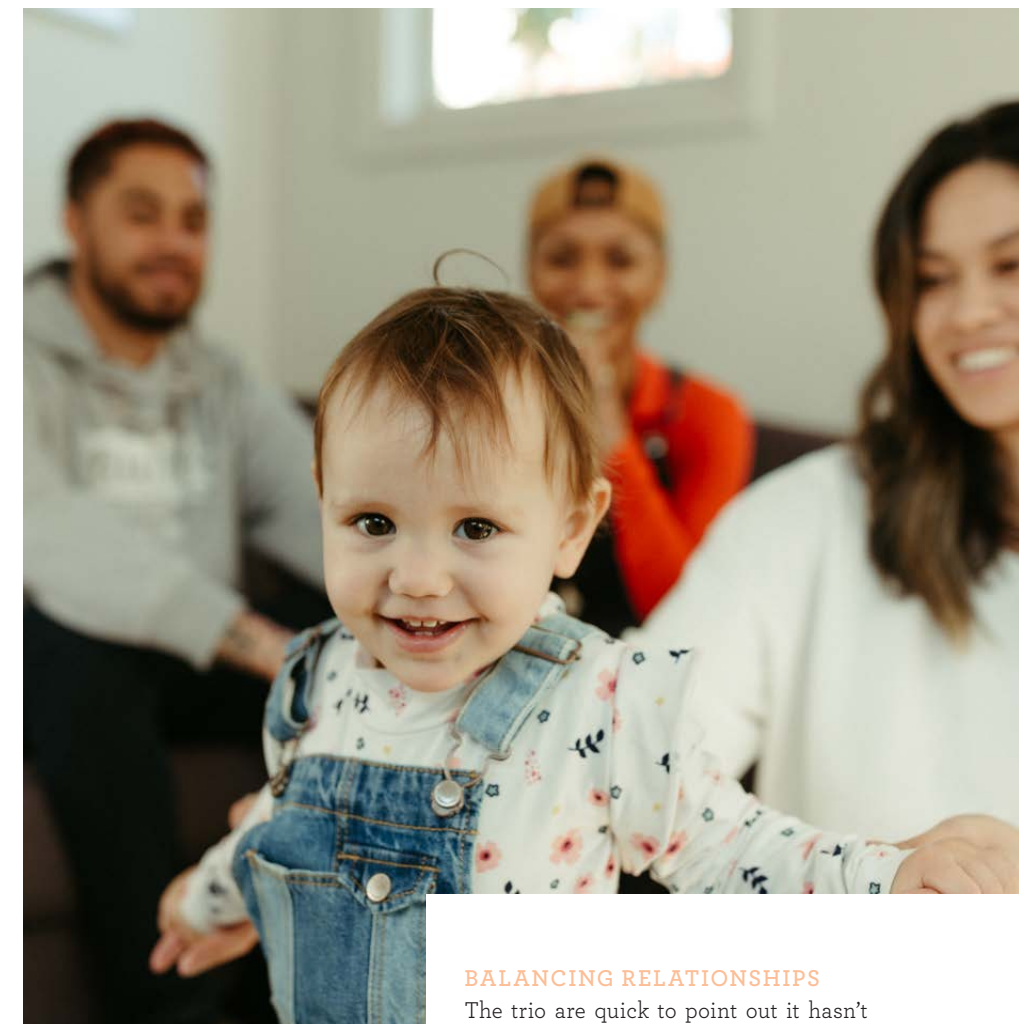
The day I met the people behind Yawye – Tausani (Sani) Simeit-Barton, Ani Tawhiao-Lomas and Hope Papali'I – the love between these three was obvious.

In pre-Covid times, Sani and Ani were working at the same restaurant, where Ani was head of design and marketing, and Sani was the chef. The two became friends and worked on side hustles together. They also discovered that Sani's wife, Hope, went to high school with Ani. Then came the first lockdown and they decided it was time to develop Yawye.

"Sani had had this idea in his mind for a few years before any action, then the pandemic hit and the place where we had jobs shut down. Everything just aligned and we thought, what more have we got to lose?" says Ani.

From May 2020, they spent the rest of the year doing research and

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## BALANCING RELATIONSHIPS

The trio are quick to point out it hasn't been easy – Ani and her fiancé Giuliano also had their first baby in 2021. Their daughter Calina is now nine months old, and Ani says being a first-time mum and having a new business, has had its challenges.

"I don't know if starting a business is ever meant to be easy, it should be a little bit challenging. We've had highs and lows, but that's natural. Having a baby was not part of that timeline, I always wanted to have babies a few years later, and focus on growing the business."

She says during her pregnancy she knew her two priorities were baby and business, though she didn't quite know how that was going to balance yet. But she took each day at a time, and prioritised Calina.

"I'm still learning. While some friends' babies would be content to sit in the corner for a few hours, my baby is full-on, she is super active and craves attention. I spent many late nights working until 3 or 4am."

"Although I'm all in with the business, I didn't want to take away from those first few days and months with her, and wanted to give her that bonding mum and baby time, ensuring she's healthy

development, taste testing with friends' babies, and perfecting the recipes. As a result, they now offer 26 handmade products across three categories (purees, mashables, and chunky) using ingredients such as Māori potatoes, kamo kamo, taro, chia seeds, paw paw and kūmara.

"We just wanted everything not to be rushed, quietly perfect, and then we were finally ready to launch in April 2021" says Ani.

Having a subscription service made sense because they could offer convenience and continue to run during lockdowns. Sani says it all came together at the right moment.

"The first lockdown meant we had time to think about it, as other work had stopped. When given time like that, people either make the most of it, or watch it go by" he says.

Hope's career background is in hospitality too, and she prepares the meals. "It's been such a blessing for me, and even though it's challenging, everything is starting to fall into place how it should, when it should. It's scary, but really exciting" she says.





and well looked after first. I'm lucky to have a good support system with family who will jump in and take her for a walk while I get admin done, but early on there was a lot of time on my phone doing updates while stuck in a chair breastfeeding."

The three say it is both easier and harder having a business with people you are so close to.

"We all have our own roles, that's why we're a good team, we know what each other are doing," says Sani.

Ani says her daughter is her full-time job, and Hope and Sani also have a foster child. Fortunately Sani is able to work full-time for Auckland's Wiri Trust for a regular income, and Hope can be at home with their foster child

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and prepare the Yawye meals.

"Hope and I work less time so we can have more time with fur babies, foster babies and my own baby," says Ani. "Running a business you lose the 'me time' or the 'friend time', and you're also trying to balance your relationship and 'marriage time'."

Talking about their close-knit team, Hope wells up, "Personally, Yawye has taught me a lot about myself and I feel really blessed to have these two".

**LOCAL FOOD FOR LOCAL BABIES**  
As well as their love for each other and their families, they feel strongly about nutritious food for children. This prompted the idea for Yawye, as Sani says it starts at birth.

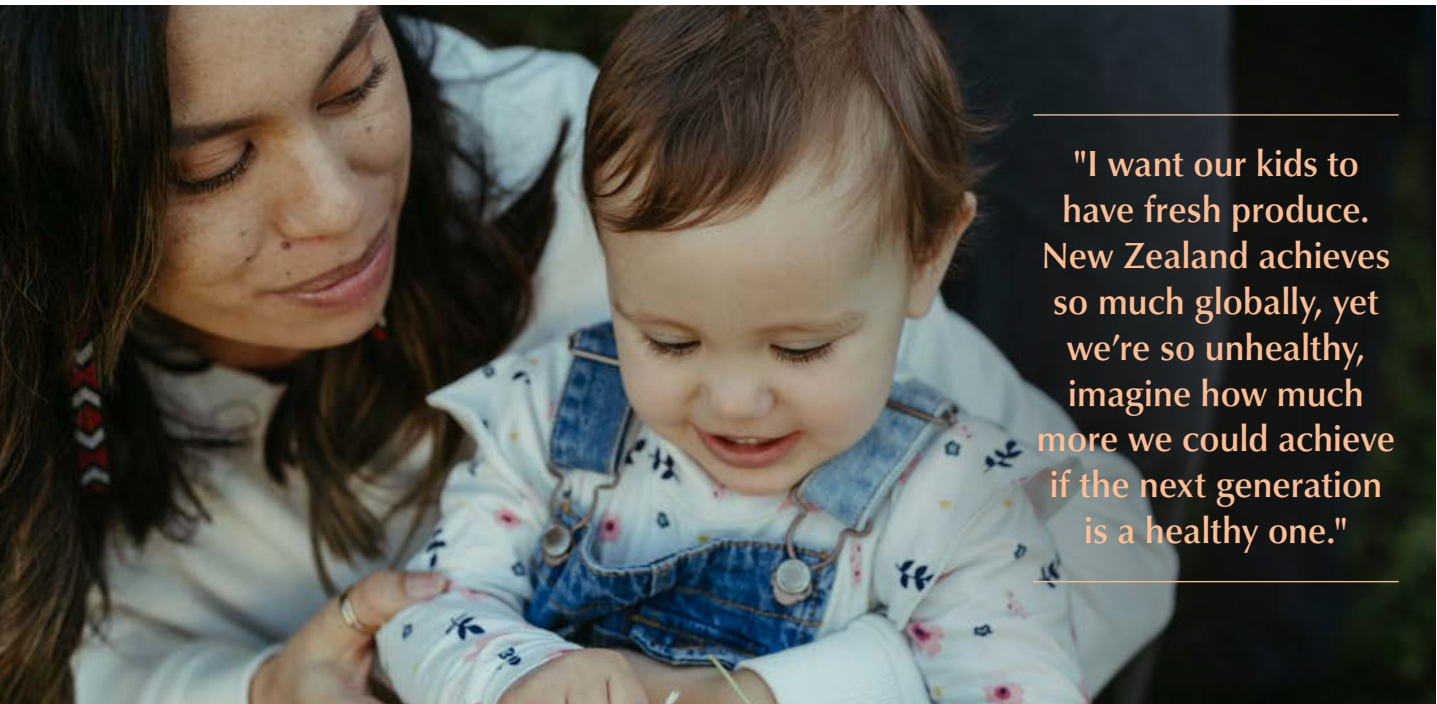
"I think a lot of child obesity comes down to the fact that we're eating wrong," says Sani. "I look back at the history of us as a people, and we've had 5,000 years of eating fresh fruit and vegetables, and only within the past 100 years have we been introduced to sugar, wheat and dairy. Our bodies, especially our young bodies, haven't adapted."

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The team offers the subscription base as much choice as possible, as they believe babies have different needs, and the parent is the best judge of that.

"For example," says Sani, "kamo kamo is extremely good for babies' digestive systems, so if your baby has a sore gut, or even gut issues, you can order more of that. Or if your baby is naturally built big, you can go for the taro as it is heavy in calcium. You know your baby and their needs".

They have noticed the sweeter fruitier flavours are popular, so to introduce families to a more balanced spread, Hope also puts together a chef selection box option.

The meals are proving to be a hit with customers and connoisseurs – feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and Yawye was a finalist in the 2021 NZ Artisan Awards. They're currently averaging 300 jars a week, which they deliver themselves in the wider Auckland area on Thursdays, with customers able to choose a morning or evening drop off.

"We do have a good price point," says Hope, "as we wanted parents to have no excuses for good food – it's affordable and we'll bring it to you!".

With Sani's chef connections, he's able to source the best produce they can, seeking out organic options.

"I feel that's where it's at, I want our kids to have fresh produce. New Zealand achieves so much globally, yet we're so unhealthy, imagine how much more we could achieve if the next generation is a healthy one."

Sustainability is a big focus and a long-term goal is to be carbon neutral. The meals are packaged in glass jars, which are returned, cleaned, sterilised and used again. Also having a subscription base means there is hardly any waste – they receive the orders, buy the ingredients, make the meals and then deliver them – there is nothing left on the shelves waiting to be sold.

**A BRIGHT FUTURE**

The three have big plans for Yawye, hoping one day to be nationwide in delivery and supermarkets. They're currently talking to a few supermarkets and working on how to make the food suitable for them, which means a longer shelf-life and discussions around pouches (for supermarkets only).

Even when they do go into supermarkets, Sani says they will keep their subscription base, because that's their true kaupapa (purpose).

"We'll keep the ability to stay fresh, as a lot of people

prefer that – especially with their kids – and I'm proud to say our food has a 10 day shelf life. Food should go off. I can also understand that many people like the ease of being able to get everything from the supermarket, so we're trying to cover everything."

They also have future ideas to tailor their indigenous meals to suit school-aged kids and older. "We want to connect with more families, not just in Auckland, but around Aotearoa. Who knows, we might be around the globe one day, it would be super exciting for us to take our foods to places like America. But it's baby steps for now," she says.

"We focus a lot on nurturing our customers, we think of them as family." •

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