

A close-up photograph of several Kiwi brand liqueur bottles. The bottles are light-colored and feature a distinctive carved face on each. The faces have large, almond-shaped eyes, a prominent nose, and a wide, open mouth showing teeth. The bottles are arranged in a row, slightly overlapping, and are set against a dark background.

# guardians of the brand

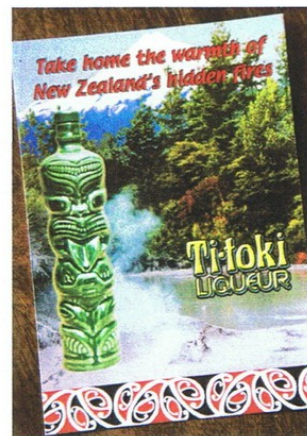
TWO YOUNG WOMEN ARE UPDATING AN ICONIC KIWI  
LIQUEUR AND ITS DISTINCTIVELY COLLECTABLE CONTAINER

WORDS **LYN BARNES** PHOTOGRAPHS **DAVID WHORWOOD**





HER DREAM WAS  
TO CAPTURE  
THE AROMATICS  
OF THE NEW  
ZEALAND BUSH  
AND SHARE  
THEM WITH  
THE WORLD



EVERY FORTNIGHT Ruth Hirst and Karuna Douglas head for Auckland International Airport where they offer free tastings of their precious Ti-toki liqueur at the entrance to the Regency Duty Free Store. They don't have fancy mixologists or music or high heels like most of the pretty young faces touting a tasting. Instead, these two women wheel out a trolley laden with their distinctive ceramic crocks that proudly sport a Maori motif.

"People really love us," says Karuna, "especially when they realize we are the owners. Some people even want us to sign the crocks for them. And many are asking for it [at Duty Free] when they get back." The bottles are not the sort of items travellers pop in their hand luggage; each 500ml crock weighs 1.8kg. But then these women aren't just pushing their product as an overseas gift; they've found a way of putting the product back in front of Kiwis' faces. The fruity, nutty flavour of the liqueur obviously rattles a few taste buds. "One chap said his gran used to give it to him when he was sick!" says Karuna.

Ti-toki has had an interesting journey with four owners since its beginnings in 1979. Today the business is jointly owned by two couples, Karuna and husband Todd with Ruth and her husband Patrick. Ruth and Karuna had been friends for a number of years.. One day Ruth just happened to be visiting when Karuna received a call from the owner at that time, asking if she knew of anyone who might like to buy the company. Karuna, a ceramicist, had been making the crocks for two years. Ruth says she had dropped by to "have a grizzle" to Karuna about her job as a social worker, so the opportunity couldn't have come at a better time.

The women both feel they are honoured guardians of the brand, responsible for taking Ti-toki to the next level. They've just relabelled and repackaged the iconic vessels and are currently working hard to re-establish relationships with their stockists. Karuna says she lovingly handcrafts the crocks, working alongside her Maori artist husband in their Muriwai workshop 20 minutes north-west of Auckland. Casting moulds are used but no two are the same. Karuna blends her own liquid clay which she pours into the moulds. These dry slowly, from the outside in, and are then clear-sealed. Each one is touched up by hand before glazing.

The original crocks were made at the now-defunct Crown Lynn factory that was New Zealand's largest pottery. Unfortunately no technical data exists either for the numbering system of the crocks or for the brown glass bottles with intricate kowhaiwhai details that were used for export. Apart from a bit of a "tidy up" with a



greenstone-inspired glaze and paua eyes, the new crocks are very much like the originals. These days each one proudly carries the words Made in Aotearoa on the base. The numbering system is now consistent too. Theoretically, every crock ever made has a number but Karuna and Ruth can find no logic in the previous system.

Ti-toki liqueur was originally established by winemaker Diana Balich. Articles from the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* in 1980 reveal that this West Aucklander inherited her parents' 10ha vineyard at 21. With only a year's accountancy behind her and winemaking in her blood, she began to try out some new products. According to the *Weekly*, she felt New Zealand had "no image of itself", so she set about cooking up all sorts of brews on her coal range using kawakawa, manuka leaves and oils from titoki berries. Her dream was to capture the aromatics of the New Zealand bush and share them with the world. She wanted the drink to unfold in layers, revealing different taste sensations, textures, depths of flavour and warmth. She trialled blends for three years before she was happy with her final concoction.

The legend that inspired her was that of the Patupaiarehe people who warmed themselves and toasted friendships with a drink distilled from the berries of the titoki tree. The potion, it was said, captured the intensity and glow of Aotearoa's hidden fires. The original crocks, in shades of streaky brown and jade, captured public attention. The first was presented to the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Muldoon, and was the liqueur of choice for guests at the opening of the New Zealand Embassy in Washington in 1980. At first all went well, with Ti-toki in wine outlets throughout the country, exports to a number of countries and at least 50 employees to make it all happen. No one knows exactly what went wrong but Diana Balich was declared bankrupt this year for a second time.

However, these two focused and passionate women are getting things back on track. As for the actual brew, it appears the mix was inconsistent until an identical blend was developed using natural

extracts and essences. The formulation is made by a company in Greenhithe on Auckland's upper harbour. John Millward from Great Tastes NZ (see page 132) distributes the liqueur to chefs who are using it creatively. Kai in the City in Wellington includes it in its tiramisu and Air New Zealand has also been using it in a dessert. It's enjoying a revival in cocktails too: it was a vital ingredient in the Extreme Cocktail Jet Challenge at the 42 Below Cocktail World Cup last year.

Now Ruth and Karuna are looking at reducing the alcoholic content.

Somewhere along the way it went from the original 39 percent to 37 percent, but they hope to reduce it even further without affecting the flavour. They're also keen to see it used more in valued-added goods. Bennetts of Mangawhai have already whipped up chocolates using Ti-toki concentrate with lemon myrtle. And the pair hopes to get back into exporting. They often receive emails from overseas, asking where it can be bought. "We had one email from a chap whose mother had had her crock for nearly 30 years and wanted to drink it on her 90th birthday. He was a bit concerned as there was some sediment in the bottle and he wanted to know if it was still OK," says Karuna.

For that reason Ruth and Karuna are keen to find an original crock to add to their collection. They want to check the flavour of its 39 percent content, so constantly scan the Trade Me website. As much as they love their precious crocks, they don't want to see Ti-toki bought merely as a souvenir. They reckon it's a great liqueur and the ultimate barbecue drink served chilled with ginger beer, finely chopped mint and a slice of lemon. Just not too many! 🍹



FOR TI-TOKI DRINKS RECIPES SEE  
[WWW.NZLIFEANDLEISURE.CO.NZ](http://WWW.NZLIFEANDLEISURE.CO.NZ)