

**Apata**  
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## KIWIFRUIT'S CULTURAL MELTING POT





Deep in the heart of harvest, workers from around New Zealand and the wider Pacific rim descend on kiwifruit hot-spots to help send our tasty products to the world. Tauranga writer **Sue Hoffart** and photographer **Joel Ford** ventured out to tell some of their stories.

Every year, New Zealand relies on a colourful, multi-cultural flock to sort and pack and safely dispatch its kiwifruit to market.

This seasonal workforce assembles from exotic Asian cities and balmy Pacific islands, from rice paddies and desk jobs, from backpacker hostels and small town New Zealand, in search of kiwifruit industry wages.

One Bay of Plenty post harvest company says the industry and wider community needs to better recognise the value of its temporary workforce.

"For a few mad months each year, we have this insatiable need for labour that just can't be filled locally," says Apata Group managing director Stuart Weston.

According to NZ Kiwifruit Growers Inc, the industry employs a permanent workforce of about 9,800 nationally. This year, they'll be joined by another 8,600 or so seasonal workers, a third of whom will hail from overseas.

"And we ask all these people to work their guts out, often through the night, to do their job accurately and well and get fruit out the door in prime condition so our growers get the best possible price.

"Without them, there is no billion dollar kiwifruit industry."

This year, Apata will employ about 650 temporary staff to supplement its permanent workforce at two sites, near Katikati and Te Puke. Some are locals, some come from neighbouring employment-

starved towns like Murupara, Kawerau and Te Teko. Another 138 have travelled directly from Vanuatu, Malaysia and Thailand through the government's Registered Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which aims to cover seasonal horticultural labour shortages. In the current financial year, Immigration New Zealand issued 1500 temporary RSE work visas to Bay of Plenty employers.

"We go to a lot of trouble to get the right people in here. We send staff to places like Vanuatu and Malaysia to meet and recruit some of our workers, go into their homes, so we know a fair bit about them.

"Many of our packhouse staff, including the overseas people, return year after year so they get to know each other. You'll hear the word family used a lot round here. We work huge hours together and we do become a kind of family. People look out for each other."

He said this was especially evident early this season, when Vanuatu workers arrived in Tauranga a week after the devastation of Cyclone Pam.

"As a company, we obviously did what we could in terms of offering support and practical help with things like clothing and blankets and just keeping an eye out for them. But a lot of good stuff happens in the smoko room, too. People from Kawerau or Thailand sharing food and quietly offering sympathy and help.

"That smoko room, it's like the United Nations, a real cultural melting pot. We're pretty proud of that. And all of these people have amazing stories - we're actually toying with the idea of putting some of these stories together in a book."

So who are these people who'll willingly work through the night, up to six days a week, packing fruit? How do they wind up inside a packhouse and why?

## A cyclone-proof house

### Evelyne Buleval - Vanuatu

Days after a killer cyclone tore through her Port Vila home and devastated her island nation, Evelyne Buleval had to make a hard decision.

Either catch her breath and gather her husband and four children near, or fly

to New Zealand to earn the money that will help her family rebuild their lives. On March 21, she arrived in New Zealand, to work her seventh season packing fruit for Apata.

"It was very hard to leave my children," the Vanuatu mother of four says, tears springing to her eyes. "But they know why I'm here. My vision is that I want for my children a better life."

Her husband and two older children were in another part of the island the night the cyclone hit so Evelyne and her two younger daughters filled sandbags and hauled them up a ladder to weigh the roof down. Even so, the roof was damaged strips of timber were torn from the side of the house so water poured inside, into cupboards, over furniture. Her neighbour's house was swept away entirely.

She and her children, the youngest of whom is 12, didn't sleep as they huddled together on a bed as water swirled around them.

"It was terrible. We heard the wind blowing the timber off the roofs, it was everywhere. It's very scary. All the green leaves have gone on the trees. All the foods, the crops."

Last year, half of her kiwifruit earnings were spent improving the house that is now



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Evelyn Buleval

severely damaged and in need of major repairs. This time round, she hopes to make enough money to pay for the concrete needed to make a much more sturdy, cyclone-proof home.

"That is my priority. But concrete is expensive."

Years ago, when Evelyn first spotted an advertisement for seasonal work in New Zealand, she took the idea to her husband. As a teacher, his wages barely cover food, clothing and school fees, certainly not a laptop for schoolwork, bedding or any other extras.

"When I come here, I help my husband and satisfy the needs of my children. I can make a difference."

It hasn't been easy, though. That first trip was especially difficult, when everything was foreign from the towns and streets, to the cooler weather, the language – she is a French speaker – the food and the job itself. As curiosity triumphed and her grasp of English improved, Evelyn came to relish conversations with her neighbours and colleagues.

"It's changed me. I'm a shy woman, I learned not to be shy. The work is very hard

but I like the work. Everything I learn here, every time I go back I tell my children. I'm bringing the wider world to my children. It is a big part of why I'm here."

She says people have shown her and fellow Vanuatu workers plenty of kindness.

“When I come here, I help my husband and satisfy the needs of my children. I can make a difference.”

Thai campground neighbours have shared fresh fish and invited them for meals and thoughtfully omitted any fiery spices that would be unpalatable to the islanders.

This trip, Apata bosses and colleagues have proved especially thoughtful.

"It's very caring. When we arrived, they took us some blankets and clothes. Some church people came and brought us clothes and food. They're saying, 'we're sorry'.

"They bring joy to us. The kindness helps us forget our children at home and our worries for a little while."

## A Cosmopolitan Environment

### Theresa Boyd - Kawerau

Winter can be tough in Kawerau. Paid work is scarce – 25 percent unemployment at the last census – but the power bills keep coming and children still need to be fed.

So, every packing season, a dozen sleepy, shivering residents rise before dawn and pile into the minivan that takes them to Apata's Te Puke site. The van begins its rounds about 5.30am, calling house to house, occasionally pausing while someone nips inside to fetch the person who overslept. Between the long shifts and 40-minute commute, these workers are rarely home before 7pm.

Crew matriarch Theresa Boyd never misses a day.

"The kiwifruit industry is a gift for us," she says. "There is nowhere else to work. Everybody needs their pay packet. We are proud people and if you can pay your power bill and put food on the table, you're



okay, you have choices.

"To hear your name called, to be able to go to work, it's a good feeling because our society places so much importance on being in the workforce."

Everyone takes that van to the Apatā packing sheds for the same reason, she says. They all want to support their children or whānau, just like fellow workers who travel from Murupara or Thailand, or Vanuatu.

She feels particular sympathy for foreign workers who leave their families for months at a time and frets about young children back in Asia or the Pacific Islands missing their mothers or fathers.

But she relishes the camaraderie of the packing shed, the stimulation of hearing other languages and working shoulder to shoulder with people from exotic places.

"It's a wonderful place to be, I love the cosmopolitan environment. You don't need to go to university to learn a foreign language. You don't need to travel overseas to learn about other cultures, just come to the packhouse.

"I don't care what country they come from, to me they are one of the family. You get to love these people and it's our responsibility to look after them while they're here. If my son was in France or in Vanuatu, if my daughter was in Thailand, I would like to think someone mature was looking after them. And if you listen and you're humble, people tell you their stories."

"To hear your name called, to be able to go to work, it's a good feeling because our society places so much importance on being in the workforce."

Theresa remains steadfastly quiet about her own background. When pressed, she admits to working in Dunedin. In fact, her work record shows she is a former university and polytechnic lecturer and

department head but people don't need to know that, she says.

She won't give her exact age – "I'm in the 60-plus bracket" – nor admit to being one of the fastest, most efficient packers in the shed. After at least five seasons on the floor, this year she expects to make a reluctant shift into data entry.

On her beloved packing line, younger workers have taught her to appreciate rap music – "it's another language" – and foreigners have hooked their arms through hers and called her auntie.

"People usually look down on the packers but there is great joy down there and I'm often humbled by the kindness and support I see, even in the midst of the busiest shift. I like the activity there, I like speed and physical agility. I like working with a lot of people. To me, that is the heart of the shed."

And she won't be quitting any time soon.

"Women in our family there, even when lines are full-on, worked into their 80s. Why the heck would I want to retire?"



Theresa Boyd





Sayan and Chanatda Panyasoi



## From rice fields to kiwifruit

### Sayan and Chanatda Panyasoi - Thailand

Growing up in northern Thailand, Sayan Panyasoi (Yan) knew his family's rice crop would not support him into adulthood. Some years, when prices were good, they could sell the excess. Other years, they ate the rice themselves and earned nothing.

So he left home to work in Bangkok as a forklift driver and later as a driver for guided tourists.

"I'm working 12 hours a day but just get maybe NZ\$20 a day," the father of two says. "That's why I come here."

His sister Tsitipoin had ventured to New Zealand for seasonal kiwifruit work before him and she promised her brother would find good wages, plenty of work and fine fishing along the Bay of Plenty coastline. That first season, nine years ago, he arrived at Apata as a frightened 26-year-old with high hopes.

"It was scary because I can't speak English the first time. Because I have to work with people from another country, I have to learn more



English. The NiVan people and the local people, they teach me."

Nowadays, his confidence in the language and ability to manage people has earned him a floor supervisor's job. His wife Chanatda Panyasoi (Pui) also works for Apata, in data entry. She has completed almost as many seasons as he has, only taking a break when their son Surachai was born seven years ago. Every March, the pair bid their child a tearful farewell, leave him in the care of Pui's mother for seven months and speak with him four times a week, by phone.

"Here the work is hard but it is busy. I like it busy, gets the time faster. I don't like a boring job."

This year, Pui will return to Chiang Mai in October as usual, to gather up her son and help with the rice harvest. But Yan will stay on in New Zealand, picking up orchard work between packing seasons. He has obtained an extended two-year work visa and intends to apply for residency here.

With luck, he will bring Pui and Surachai to live in the Tauranga area permanently, along with his 13-year-old daughter from a previous marriage. He is certain they will enjoy a better standard of living here and is determined both children will attend university, which will be paid for with his kiwifruit earnings.

"If I didn't have a kiwifruit job, my life would be very different. I wouldn't have money for saving. In Thailand, if we plant rice and the money is low, the government doesn't help us.

"Here the work is hard but it is busy. I like it busy, gets the time faster. I don't like a boring job."

The couple share a cabin at Maketu Beach Holiday Park, alongside 38 other Thai nationals and fellow Apata workers from Vanuatu who have become good friends. The Thai group has learned to fossick in Korean and Filipino-owned specialty food stores for the ingredients they miss from home, though much of their favourite tropical fruit is prohibitively expensive here. Yan has long since conquered his early fears of the waves that crash so close to their cabin and spends his leisure time on the rocks, fishing for snapper that he shares with his neighbours.

"New Zealand fish are really different. You get more bigger fish here and you've got good weather. When we're fishing in Thailand, it's very hot."

## A taste of home

### Yuen Tan - Malaysia

When Yuen Tan's father was ill and unable to work, her Te Puke kiwifruit packing wages helped cover medical bills and family expenses back in Malaysia.

Yuen was employed as a journalist in the Malaysian city of Kuala Lumpur, earning \$900 a month, when she heard about a programme offering temporary working visas to New Zealand. At the time, she was struggling to save money for her sister's university fund and help cover living costs for her parents and four siblings. An online Chinese forum mentioned the

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Yuen Tan

Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, which aims to cover seasonal labour shortages in the horticulture industry, mentioned earnings of up to \$1000/week. It sounded unlikely but she and a friend took a punt, signed up together and boarded a plane, hoping the promises were genuine.

"I wondered, is this the real thing or a scam," the 31-year-old says, recalling her apprehension and excitement when she first left Malaysia eight years ago.

Her fears proved groundless. On that first trip, she spent long hours grading and packing kiwifruit before returning home and reapplying the following year. She impressed her bosses and quickly climbed the ranks to data entry and supervisor roles. Now, Yuen has a permanent visa and a full-time supply co-ordinator's job with Apata Group, in the post harvest company's Te Puke office.

"In Malaysia, with the minimum pay, all my wages went to loans, insurance. I couldn't

save. I always wanted to buy a house but it's kind of hard for me to make my dreams come true."

Even so, her adopted town was initially something of a shock.

"I like going hiking or trekking with friends here, I get close to the natural things. The beaches, walking up the Mount. It's nice here, it's peaceful."

More alarming than the cold of a Te Puke winter - Kuala Lumpur sits just north of the equator - was the quiet. The Malaysian city area is home to about 7 million people, while Te Puke boasts about 7500 permanent residents.

"It's totally different. The lifestyle, the nightlife, the shopping. There it was shopping every day till midnight. Here, it's just so quiet."

Now that she's a local, Yuen has learned to embrace small town living.

"It makes me feel I don't need to do too much. In Malaysia, I would hang out with a whole bunch of friends, I would need some company all the time. Here, I can hang out by myself. I like going hiking or trekking with friends here, I get close to the natural things. The beaches, walking up the Mount. It's nice here, it's peaceful."

She also has a Kiwi boyfriend and the pair share a home in Te Puke.

Leaving family behind has been tough, though, and she tries to visit once a year. She continues to send money home sporadically and has been subsidising her youngest sister's university studies.

Last year, when her father died, she flew home and helped with funeral expenses.





Flavia Torrent and Diego Vargas

"It was bloody hard," she says. "My parents always wanted me to stay in Malaysia because it's too far away here. I couldn't tell them I want to settle down here, to start my life. You miss all the family times but you gain something, you lose something."

When she lived at home, Yuen's father taught her to make a sweet and sour pork dish that remains one of her favourites. Sometimes, when she feels a little homesick for the sights and smells and people of her native city, she will gather the familiar ingredients, cook and think of her father.

## An unexpected stop

### Flavia Torrent and Diego Vargas – Chile

When Chilean airline employee Flavia Torrent quit her job and flew 9,600km west, she had the next year of her life mapped out.

She would spend three months perfecting

her English in New Zealand, travel a little in this country, then head to South East Asia with her backpack. The 27-year-old university graduate certainly didn't expect to wind up packing kiwifruit into plastic trays six days a week.

But countryman Diego Vargas is a persuasive man.

The pair met while studying at an Auckland language school, where they discovered they had graduated from the same business administration course at the same university, the same year.

Like Flavia, Diego lives in Chile's capital city, Santiago population 6.3 million. Like her, he quit his job – he worked in a bank – to improve his English and therefore his job prospects.

Diego had heard about New Zealand's seasonal horticultural workforce and convinced his newfound girlfriend they should extend their student visas and obtain work visas to fund their travels.

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“There is a route for working holiday backpackers,” he explains. “Now, it is kiwifruit around Tauranga. Later it is cherries in the South Island.”

The couple picked rock melons in Tasman before they arrived in Tauranga in early March, checked into a youth hostel and applied to a dozen or so packhouses. Having found work at Apata’s Katikati site, they hope to live frugally and work 9½ hour shifts, for three or four months.

It’s not all hard work, though. They are smitten with the beach – the sea is much warmer than Chile – and they have accommodation in Papamoa so they can live close to the coast, notwithstanding the 45-minute work commute. They have learned to surf at Mt Maunganui beach and plan to visit the Coromandel on days off.

Their earnings will pay for further travels in the South Island – they have already seen most of the North Island – and at least five months in Asia.

The concept of earning good money from temporary, unskilled work is novel.

“There is a route for working holiday backpackers,” he explains. Now, it is kiwifruit around Tauranga. Later it is cherries in the South Island.”

“In Chile, it’s impossible to work like here. You need to be a professional, to study. If you did this work in Chile, you couldn’t live well.”

They are both enjoying the change from stressful big city jobs. If the work seems dull at times, it allows them to imagine the exotic places they will visit. And their English is improving, thanks to conversations with Kiwi and international workmates.

“All the people is friendly here and very happy when doing their job,” Flavia says.

“It’s totally different here. Very quiet. I like living in Santiago but this a good change for a little while.”

And that, Diego says, is part of the fun of travelling.

“It’s the experience. To live here, to work in a different kind of place.

“We are young so this is maybe the last time we will be able to do this. When we come back to Chile, we will go directly to get another job, to real life.”

Besides, they laugh, packing kiwifruit indoors is vastly more pleasant than bending over to pick rock melons in the rain or blazing sun.

Photography by Joel Ford/[www.joelford.ca](http://www.joelford.ca) ■