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OCEAN *of* FLAVOURS

Chef Denzel Sumsum

A Ni-Vanuatu, who grew up between Vanuatu and Australia before basing himself in the Solomon Islands, Chef Denzel Sumsum says people often over-complicate things when it comes to food.

While there may be limitations on some ingredients available in the islands, Denzel says it is important to focus on technique and what is available.

“Focus on the technique over recipe and replicate the recipe with whatever ingredients we have access to,” he says.

After working several jobs in the food industry both in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, Chef Denzel moved to the Solomon Islands to work in his family’s catering business, bringing back a wealth of experience.

Open-fire dining

Most recently, he opened Valin Kaba, an open-fire dining spot in Honiara, serving Pacific island-inspired cuisine, centred around fresh seafood and smoke, featuring whole grilled fish, barbecue plates, burgers, and local delicacies.

Chef Denzel will share how he adapts recipes and utilises all the Pacific has to offer at the upcoming *Ocean of Flavours: One Ocean, Many Flavours* event, at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) School of Hospitality and Tourism, from September 21-22, 2026.

Proudly presented by Pacific Trade Invest New Zealand (PTINZ), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) and Pacific Cooperation Broadcasting Limited (PCBL), and supported by New Zealand Chef Peter Gordon ONZM, *Ocean of Flavours* will see celebrated Pacific chefs from Fiji, New Caledonia, Tonga, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea traveling to Aotearoa to join forces with some of New Zealand's top chefs to demonstrate their culinary skills.

Chef Denzel and the rest of the Pacific cohort will join renowned chefs from New Zealand in a high-energy culinary collaboration on day one, and engage with food writers, influencers, and industry stakeholders on day two, culminating in a dinner for the public on September 22.

He is eager to learn from all the chefs at *Ocean of Flavours* and listen to their stories about their journeys, he says.

"This will better aid and achieve the mission we have all undoubtedly undertaken, which is to bring community together through food."

Bringing community together

Chef Denzel first recognised food is a central element in bringing in community and nurturing relationships as a young boy in Vanuatu.

"That coupled with my natural curiosity about how certain dishes were made paved the way for my culinary journey into adulthood," he explains.

"My grandmother Bubu Lydia, an avid baker and home cook, nurtured and encouraged an eager young boy to learn skills early on in life and to follow his stomach.

"The way in which she showed respect and care to those around her through her cooking is still by far the most impactful and influential lesson that I try to emulate along my journey."

Journey is underway

For the Pacific chef, the journey feels like it is only just getting started.

"I feel like I am just at the beginning of my journey, exploring what is possible with the resources I have access to and rediscovering knowledge from those who came before me.

“Calling both Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands home there is an abundance of knowledge buried in everyday life and passed down traditions within both communities.

“I hope to learn from that knowledge to reignite and reimagine traditional flavours and not only showcase to our people what is possible, but to showcase our food to citizens of the world that are open to experiencing it.”