

A taste of Spain

Olsen mixes memory and desire

The man who is arguably Australia's greatest living artist has combined his love of food and art – and family – in an exhibition with a twist, writes **Katrina Strickland**.

John Olsen and Stephen Ormandy were discussing openings. The 82-year-old Olsen has had dozens, including one for his latest show, *Culinaria: The Cuisine of the Sun*, which opened at Tim Olsen's Sydney gallery last night. Olsen's son-in-law, Ormandy, had his second only last month.

The old-timer and the novice agreed on one thing: openings were excruciating. Always.

"Well, it's just so embarrassing," said Olsen. "I've been doing it all my life, but I've never got over it."

Added Ormandy: "It's a series of emotions all at once that you don't really know how to deal with."

The pair were sitting at a long table at Tim Olsen's gallery awaiting the arrival of Paloma Picasso, in town to launch her latest jewellery line for Tiffany.

It was one of those tropically wet Sydney summer days, which was just as well because the upstairs space at the Woollahra gallery was closed to the viewing public.

Picasso wanted to meet Olsen, the man deemed (in a frightfully overused term) Australia's greatest living artist. As such, the Olsen clan – patriarch John, son Tim, daughter Louise and their partners – were awaiting her arrival.

Men in white shirts and black pants filed in with silver trays full of canapes, as bottles of Veuve Cliquot and sparkling mineral water were put on ice. Drinks in the gallery were to be followed by lunch at Lucio's, the Sydney restaurant famed as much for the art on its walls as the food on its plates.

"You'd think we were awaiting the Queen," quipped Tim, embarrassed by the palaver yet anxious that everything be just right. It was a day for family and food, and the song lines between various members of the two families echoed around the gallery.

Hanging upstairs were works



John Olsen with *Butcher's Cart Deia de Mallorca*, 2010

Photo: FIONA MORRIS

from *Culinaria*, which harks back to Olsen's time spent in Pablo Picasso's home country, Spain.

The downstairs space featured Ormandy's suite of paintings, *In the Moment*, his second art show after 24 years building Dinosaur Designs with Louise, his wife, and their business partner, Liane Rossler. (That show has since closed.)

Olsen had two stints in Spain during his 20s, the first on an art scholarship, the second when he returned a short time later with his then wife Valerie and their toddlers.

Spain ignited in Olsen another passion: food. The contrast between what he had left behind and the food he enjoyed in Spain was stark.

"When I grew up it was overcooked chops and three veg, mostly grey. If you served a

medium-rare steak it would be grounds for divorce," Olsen recalled.

"Spain was still recovering from a horrific civil war. People were very poor and meat very expensive, so they cooked with the vegetables and fruit that grew there."

When Olsen returned to Australia he "wowed" his artist friends by cooking up big paellas.

"They thought it was a miracle but it was no miracle at all, it was just something they had never experienced," he said

Olsen has combined his love of food and capacity with a brush in an exhibition with a novel twist, one in which the catalogue doubles as a recipe book. Each page has a recipe on one side and Olsen's depiction of the finished dish on the other. There's marinated seafood

barbecue, suckling piglet, squid ink risotto and bouillabaisse.

Some of the recipes are Olsen's, others contributed by his partner in the exercise, Andy Harris, a British chef and food journalist who helped Jamie Oliver start *Jamie* magazine. (The art/food link continues later this month when Oliver launches his magazine at the gallery.)

Not unlike the resin jewellery and bowls Dinosaur sells, Ormandy's paintings feature strong, geometric blocks of colour. There's no obvious link to Olsen's oeuvre, yet Ormandy said he had been an influence.

"Not stylistically, but if you distil down what John does, there's a very basic backdrop on which he hangs the high notes of the song," Ormandy said. "That strength of composition influences me greatly."

He pointed by way of illustration to Olsen's *Butcher's Cart Deia de Mallorca*, a large painting depicting the meat cart Olsen walked past when living in Spain in the 1950s.

Olsen can't say why the meat cart from decades ago came out, remarking only that "memory is the most powerful factor in art, whether you're a poet, novelist or painter".

Sitting on top of the meat cart is a dog. Olsen is more renowned for frogs, of course, but is not that way inclined right now.

"The Irish poet Yeats called his theme circus animals, and one of my circus animals is frogs," he said. "It's what people enjoy, I suppose, but it can be an anchor around your neck as well."

Butcher's Cart is a dark painting with a big price tag, \$650,000.

The other paintings in the show are priced between \$380,000 and \$650,000, with mixed media works from \$33,000 to \$75,000.

Olsen usually advises young artists to stay away from dark palettes, calling them "artistic suicide" in Australia.

These days, however, selling does not tend to be a problem for him.