

MARCH 9, 2010

The Sydney Morning Herald

good living



Fine art of dining

John Olsen's creative flair with food

Sting in the tale: making
Tasmanian honey

Field work: fine
Megalong Valley beef

Aged wine: Tahbilk
celebrates 150 years

good living cover story

From palate to palette

For the passionate and creative John Olsen, food is art and, in his latest exhibition and book, art is food, writes **Helen Pitt**.

En route to the Spanish island of Majorca, artist John Olsen had an epiphany in Barcelona's La Boqueria market.

The year was 1957 but, growing up in 1930s Australia, he thought green beans were meant to be khaki-coloured and peas were grey and mushy. Born in Newcastle in 1928, where his father ran a clothing shop in Hunter Street, he says his mother as a cook was typical of her time: everything was over-boiled.

It was that first visit to a market in the Catalan capital, where he discovered the real colours of vegetables and ones he'd never heard of like eggplant, pimientos and green peppers.

"It was a surrealist scene of saffron-coloured chickens and ducks," he says of the Barcelona market. "Black and white studded earth-brown sausages, vegetables of vivid

'My interest is in the emotional impact of food.'

John Olsen

Olsen, now 82, says that market visit gave him the desire to learn to cook. "When I left Australia for Europe in 1957, I couldn't even grill a chop," he says.

When a wealthy businessman sponsored him to go to Europe to study art – on the proviso he lived anywhere but London – it started a lifelong desire to create colourful culinary, as well as artistic, masterpieces. His

first stop was Paris and the Rue Mouffetard market. Then he hopped on a Lambretta scooter, with little more than a copy of Elizabeth David's iconic

cookbook, *Mediterranean Food*, and headed to Spain, where he was to have that life-changing moment.

Olsen lived on Majorca for four years, where he learnt to cook "peasant food" from locally-grown produce. "I realised these peasants lived better than most Australians."

When he returned to live in Sydney's Watsons Bay in 1961, he recalls a still desperate food scene, with only one good Sydney restaurant, the Hungry Horse, in Paddington. Instead of dining out, he began



Colourful ... John Olsen finishes his arroz nero dish with Duck à l'Orange displayed.

to cook for his family and often an appreciative audience of hungry artists.

He'd clamber into a small dinghy with his son, Tim, and occasionally author Patrick White (a fellow cook) and drift around the pilings of the local wharf cutting off rich, black mussels.

"We had no competition – Australians were still very conservative when it came to mussels," he says.

He'd return with them in a sack, heat up the old laundry copper, add copious amounts of garlic and flagons of white wine and an army of students would arrive with plenty of bread to soak up the broth.

Tim says he can often see in his father's art work "the drizzling of olive oil, the floods of saffron, the sprinkling of paprika and the smudge of truffle" – the cooking he grew up with.

As a child, his favourite dish made by dad was Spanish tortilla; Olsen's daughter, Louise, says hers was eggs with sardines.

Other regular guests at the Olsen dinner table included gallery owner and wine lover Rudy Komen and artists Sidney Nolan,

Leonard French and Fred Williams (who Olsen recalls fondly as being "good on the tooth").

After 53 years in the kitchen, Olsen has created a collection of his favourite recipes in *Culinaria – the Cuisine of the Sun*, which accompanies an exhibition of food-inspired paintings at Tim Olsen Gallery, Woollahra. With help from the likes of celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver (Andy Harris, editor of *Jamie* magazine, is food editor of Olsen's collection) and Rick Stein, Olsen has paired his favourite dishes with art he has painted from memorable meals. Most dishes are Spanish-inspired because it is the country that most influenced his food palate and colour palette. He has cooked all the recipes and in many of the paintings you can spot his beret bald pate appearing as chef.

"I am not into fashionable cooking, my interest is in the emotional impact of food, the expectation of it, the succouring and savouring of it," he says.

At a recent lunch Olsen cooked with his favourite restaurateur, Lucio Galletto, he described in detail one of his signature dishes – arroz nero made with cuttlefish ink – stage whispering the ingredients and the precise placing of the red strips of pimiento over the indigo rice, with great dramatic tension.

"Sunshine, I am telling you it's like a painting," he enthused, emphasising the sun is the thing he wants people to see in all his art. "Plating up" has always been a favourite part of preparing a meal for "the maestro", as Galletto calls him.

The meal – gambas a la plancha, arroz negro and mango with gelato – was a masterpiece of colour and taste. "It's as if the dishes fell off the wall onto the plates," Tim says.

Culinaria – the Cuisine of the Sun is sold online, \$30. Exhibition runs to March 21, Tim Olsen Gallery, 63 Jersey Road, Woollahra. See timolsengallery.com.

Independent Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy

Public Consultation

The Council of Australian Governments and the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council are undertaking an independent review of food labelling law and policy. The Food Labelling Review Committee is seeking comments from all interested persons on the "Food Labelling Review Issues Consultation Paper". This Paper and related documents were released on 5 March 2010 and can be accessed at www.foodlabellingreview.gov.au

The closing date for written submissions is 14 May 2010.

As part of the consultation, the Food Labelling Review Committee will also be hosting public forums in Australia and New Zealand from 17 March – 7 May 2010. To register to attend a public forum, please go to www.foodlabellingreview.gov.au

If you require a hard copy, assistance or further information please contact the Food Labelling Review Secretariat via email FoodLabellingReview@health.gov.au



Maestro ... entertaining at the Tim Olsen Gallery. Photo: Steven Siewert