



AT ITS HELM FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES, ROBERTA MUIR HAS BUILT A LOYAL FOLLOWING FOR SYDNEY SEAFOOD SCHOOL, WHICH GIVES KEEN HOME COOKS THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE MENTORED BY SOME OF AUSTRALIA'S FINEST CHEFS.

Words **Carli Ratcliff**

Schooling culinary passions

“Food is about generosity,” says Roberta Muir from her office perched above the auction floor of Sydney Fish Market. “That’s why people come to the table, to share,” she continues. “It’s also why you encounter some of the most generous people you’ll ever meet in this industry, and why our teachers are so popular; they have a sense of generosity.”

Muir has been based here for some 22 years running Sydney Seafood School. “When I got the job, I knew nothing about running a cooking school,” she remembers. “I thought to myself, ‘how the hell am I going to do this?’”

Her Anglo-Celtic background meant that Muir’s childhood dinners were mostly meat and three veg. “Dad was a recreational fisherman, so there was fish, but pretty much all protein was overcooked in those days, meat was grey, fish was dry and you wouldn’t have dreamt of putting dressing, that slimy stuff, on a salad,” she laughs.

Growing up in the western Sydney suburb of Greystanes, Muir encountered families from a range of cultures, among them, Maltese. “When I went to friends’ houses they were eating

interesting, completely different food,” she remembers. “I quickly realised that food was a way to broaden my horizons and a window into other cultures.”

Keen to share her own food experiences with friends, aged 12 years Muir spent her Christmas money; sent from relatives in Scotland, on a meal for them all. “That’s my earliest food memory,” she says. “Swapping the pound notes at the bank and then taking my mates to Greystanes shopping centre for what were really good pies and chips.”

A COOKING QUEST

Teaching herself to cook from *The Australian Women’s Weekly Cookbooks*, and about wine from Sunday newspaper wine columns, Muir began a quest to understand everything she could about food and dining. “Back then, all I wanted to do was to eat in nice restaurants, and learn everything I could.”

In 1988 she travelled across Turkey for three months with her Turkish best friend. A handful of years later, she made her first pilgrimage to Italy, igniting a deep interest in Italian food. By the mid 1990s, Muir was back in Sydney working for a small poultry processor.



Clockwise from left: Roberta Muir; Cheong Liew; Giovanni Piliu; Paul Carmichael; Suzanne Gibbs, Tetsuya Wakuda and Margaret Fulton; Mark Best.

"I just wanted to be in the food industry and that was a good, albeit unglamorous start," she says.

A job in sales with King Island Dairy followed, before her current tenure at Sydney Seafood School.

A roster on the wall showed the teaching timetable. Hideo Dekura taught the sushi class (he still does), Serge Danserau, Charmaine Solomon and Peter Doyle had been teaching since the very first program, but Muir was keen to expand the offering to include more chefs of a similar calibre. "Small problem, I didn't know any," she laughs.

Muir met her now husband Franz Scheurer when he attended one of David Thompson's classes. "Franz kept suggesting chefs who should be teaching,

"Do you have Janni Kyritsis on the program?" I was like 'ahhhh...no, I don't know him,'" she says. "So Franz took me to lunch at MG Garage to introduce me to Janni and over the course of the next year introduced me to chefs all over town, and so the program began to grow."

"I had a preconceived idea that chefs were stern men in tall white hats, an old fashioned European notion," she says. "I expected they'd be the kind of people who'd keep knowledge close to their chests. But I was wrong. I can't recall



Scallops baked in their shells with white wine & breadcrumbs by Frank Camorra



one chef that hasn't given every ounce of energy and knowledge to their class. Each chef mentors through their generosity."

UP CLOSE AND COOKING

The school runs 225 classes each year, as well as around 100 corporate classes. The proximity afforded to attendees is unlike other cooking schools, says Muir. "Food television the likes of *MasterChef* has turned these chefs into mentors for the general public, and they have access to them here at the school. They've seen a chef on TV and grown to admire them, and then suddenly they have the ability to ask that very chef, 'is my sauce right?', 'am I cutting this correctly?'"

In addition to introducing Muir to chefs, many of whom still teach at the school, the year of lunches produced two other important outcomes for her. She and Scheurer fell in love and eventually married, and she forged a working relationship and friendship with Kyritsis.

"I asked Janni to write a book because I wanted to be able to cook his dishes at home," she remembers. "'When I retire, when I retire', he'd say." When he did retire five years later, he called Muir. "It was a huge honour to be offered that opportunity, truly a gift from Janni."

Kyritsis' act of generosity, and subsequent mentoring launched Muir's career as a cookbook author. Kyritsis' book *Wild Weed Pie: A Lifetime of Recipes*, was published in 2006 with Muir as co-author. "Janni is a great mentor, one of the great industry mentors," says Muir. "He's a career maker, but he goes

about it quietly, he likes to help people reach their potential. Not only me, but great chefs Lauren Murdoch (Portside), Mark Jensen (Red Lantern), Jonathan Barthelmess (The Apollo, Sydney, Tokyo; Cho Cho San, Sydney; Greca and Yoko, Brisbane), all of whom he calls 'the children'."

Muir has since written *Sydney Seafood School Cookbook* (2012), *A Sardinian Cookbook* with Giovanni Pilu (Pilu at Freshwater), and *A Lombardian Cookbook* with Alessandro Pavoni (Ormeggio).

Her next challenge is to manage the design and programming of the school in the new Sydney Fish Market premises, due to open in around five years. Muir hopes the school might have a vocational offering by then. "Don't hold me to it," she says. "However the school evolves, the mission will remain the same, to inspire everyone to eat well together."



Images this page: Guests creating masterpieces at Sydney Seafood School.

+ Offer

+ Reader discount

Roberta Muir is offering *Selector* readers 25% off when they book a cooking class at the Sydney Seafood School. Simply add the code SELECTOR to the promotional code section at checkout. Plus, when you book, you'll go into the draw to WIN a tour of Vannella cheese factory for 4 people finishing with a tasting of their fresh cheeses (plus a cooler bag of cheeses valued at \$228!). Book your class at sydneyseafoodschoo.com.au



Salad of hot-smoked rainbow trout, treviso & green beans by Stefano Manfredi

Salad of hot-smoked rainbow trout, treviso & green beans by Stefano Manfredi

Serves 8 as an entrée

600g young green beans, trimmed
1 clove garlic, minced
1 handful flat-leaf parsley leaves, finely chopped
salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2/3 cup (160ml) extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon wholegrain mustard
2/3 cup (160ml) red wine vinegar (see Chefs' ingredients)
2 hot-smoked rainbow trout, skin and bones removed and flesh broken into bite-sized pieces
1 treviso radicchio, trimmed and thinly sliced

Alternative species
hot-smoked brook trout or any other freshwater trout

1. Blanch the beans in plenty of rapidly boiling salted water for a couple of minutes, until they are tender but still have some bite.
2. Meanwhile, combine the garlic, parsley, salt, pepper and half the oil in a large bowl.
3. Drain the beans well, then add them to the bowl and toss to coat.
4. Whisk together the mustard, vinegar and remaining oil to make a dressing.
5. Toss the trout with the treviso, beans and dressing. Serve immediately, piling some of the trout on top of the salad.

Wine match: Rosé, lighter style Chardonnay or Pinot Noir

Scallops baked in their shells with white wine & breadcrumbs by Frank Camorra

Serves 4 as an entrée

12 commercial scallops, on the half shell
2- tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 white onion, finely diced
1 - 80g piece jamón, diced
1 tablespoon Spanish unsmoked sweet paprika (see Chefs' ingredients)
500ml albariño or other dry white wine
Salt flakes, to taste
1 cup (70g) coarse fresh breadcrumbs (see Chefs' ingredients)

Alternative species
blue mussel; surf clam

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C (fan-forced). Gently remove the scallops from their shells and trim off the small dark vein along the edge of the meat (see page 121), retaining the roe and any juices. Return the scallops to their shells.
2. Heat a frying pan over medium heat and add the oil. When hot, add the onion and cook for a minute. Stir in the jamón and cook for a further minute or so, until the onion just starts to colour. Stir in the paprika, cook for another minute, then stir in the wine. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer until reduced by half. Remove from the heat.
3. Sprinkle the scallops with salt, spoon a tablespoon of the onion mixture over each one and sprinkle with breadcrumbs. Place in the oven for about 5 minutes, until the scallops are just cooked through and the breadcrumbs are lightly coloured.

Wine match: Pinot G, Vermentino or Fiano

+ Wine

+ Salad of hot-smoked rainbow trout, treviso & green beans by Stefano Manfredi

The trout salad is going to be enhanced by a fragrant Rosé, lighter Chardonnay or your favourite Pinot Noir. Keep the wines fresh and bright, just like the dish.

+ Scallops baked in their shells with white wine & breadcrumbs by Frank Camorra

With an eye towards the Italian inspiration here, we'd opt for Euro-style, textural whites like Pinot G, Vermentino or Fiano for an harmonious pairing.



OUT NOW

Extract from *Sydney Seafood School Cookbook* by Roberta Muir, published by Lantern on 24 October 2012, RR \$49.99