

The sideyard's daybed is Roberta's favourite perch. **Left:** The outdoor kitchen has everything a cook needs, from a built-in barbecue and wok burner to a sink and refrigerator.



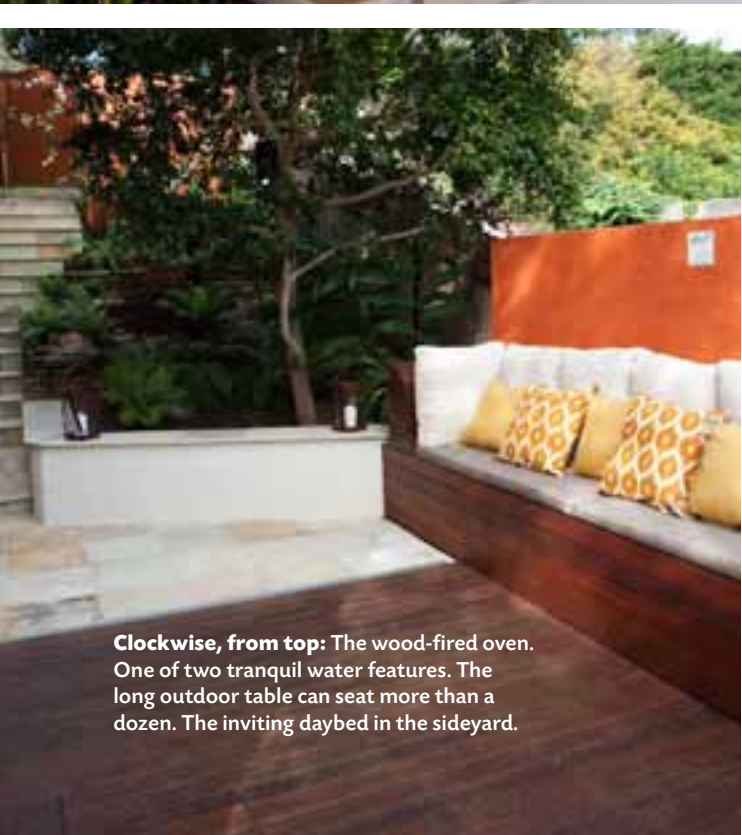
# Open season

Author and cooking school manager **Roberta Muir** loves sharing her alfresco dream – an inviting outdoor kitchen that's open to sunshine, family and friends.

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**F**or their sixth wedding anniversary, Roberta Muir gave her husband a barbecue. It was especially apt: not only was iron/metal the traditional gift for that year, but the couple share a serious love of cooking. Roberta is a cookbook author and the manager of Sydney Seafood School, at Sydney Fish Market, while husband Franz Scheurer is a food writer.

Today, the barbecue sizzles proudly in their outdoor kitchen, the hub of an inviting yard complete with dining patio, daybed lounge area and wood-fired oven. It wasn't always this way. When they moved in 10 years ago, there were sparse garden beds and stony ground. So they embarked on renovating the yard in stages. The beautiful result is a series of outdoor "rooms" framed overhead by old citrus trees, plus an olive tree Roberta planted when they moved in. "It was a symbolic housewarming gift to ourselves – a wish for a peaceful life in this house." And that they've had, along with many happy times. Friends often gather around the outdoor table and lately have enjoyed recipe testings, as Roberta has been working on two titles: *A Sardinian Cookbook*, with chef Giovanni Pilu, and the *Sydney Seafood School Cookbook*, a compilation of chefs' recipes (both due out next year from Lantern).



**Clockwise, from top:** The wood-fired oven. One of two tranquil water features. The long outdoor table can seat more than a dozen. The inviting daybed in the sideyard.

“A couple of years ago, we were without an oven for six months and we cooked outside every night – it was wonderful.” **Roberta**

**If your outdoor kitchen were an animal, what would it be?**

Perhaps a peacock, as I like lots of colour in the décor – bright cushions and serviettes and, of course, my beautiful burnt-orange walls.

**Your favourite thing about this space?**

It’s comfortable. People step outside and immediately feel at home. It’s a very casual space where they can lounge around – on a chair, a wall, the wide steps or the daybed.

**What were the top three things on your wish list when you renovated?**

Great water features, a daybed for relaxing and reading, and marble benchtops in the outdoor kitchen for appearance and durability (it’s also great for rolling pastry and pasta dough). We have a water feature by sculptor Folko Kooper (koopertasmania.com) and another by our landscape architect, Chris Munster, made from an old copper washing tub. They look beautiful, are a talking point and the sound is very relaxing.

**Tell us about the wood-fired oven.**

My favourite cuisine is Italian. Many years ago, I lived in Haberfield, in Sydney’s inner west, and a lot of the Italian families there had wood-fired ovens in their backyards. I decided that, when I finally bought a house, I would have one. So the first thing Franz and I did when we bought this house – even before we moved in – was have the wood-fired oven built.

**What do you like to make in it?**

I love to make pizza – with potato, rosemary and fior di latte. Franz uses it for cassoulet and whole suckling pigs. It is very versatile.

**What’s the largest number of people you’ve seated at your outdoor table?**

We had 14 for a recent party and it worked really well. I love to see the long table beautifully set and all my friends and family gathered around. It’s just big enough to hold my family – mum, sisters, nieces and nephews, plus partners – at Christmas, Easter and for other special occasions.

**What ingredients do you always have in the pantry/fridge?**

Extra virgin olive oil, lemons, sambal oelek, Murray River salt flakes, Parmigiano Reggiano, canned Italian tomatoes and artisanal pasta.

**Do you have a signature dish when you have friends over?**

I love casual food – big platters of cold cuts, smoked salmon, antipasti and crudités. Food that people have to pass around and serve to each other gets the conversation flowing.

**Do guests always expect seafood at your dinner parties?**

I guess it would be odd not to have some seafood at any gathering that I host! We do often start with freshly shucked oysters on a big bowl of ice. Sometimes Franz cooks one of his signature dishes, Oysters Joanna (named after one of our friends). He dusts oysters in tapioca starch and deep-fries them over the wok burner, then sprinkles them with prickly ash (ground salt and Sichuan peppercorns). It’s a wonderful dish for people who don’t like raw oysters – and has been known to convert more than one oyster hater.

**What’s that plaque in the orange wall?**

It says in Italian, “My home is open to the sun, guests and friends.” I bought it in Amalfi over 20 years ago and have carried it around with me from house to house ever since, waiting for the right place to install it. When we did the last round of renovations, I knew I’d finally found the perfect place for it.

**ESSENTIAL COOKING TOOLS**

“I think it’s the basics that are most important,” says Roberta. “With a couple of trusty wooden spoons, these are the things I use the most.”

- **A good sharp knife.** I tend to use the same small cook’s knife for almost everything.
- **A heavy-based frying pan.** We invested in beautiful French copper pans, buying one at a time over several years – they’re beautiful, last a lifetime and give heat evenly.
- **A salad spinner.** I love salads, and all salad leaves need washing and drying thoroughly – otherwise, the dressing just slides off them and pools in the bottom of the bowl.



**GET THE LOOK**

**1** Dulux Weathershield acrylic paint in Orangeade, \$85.95/4L. **2** Ikat cushion (left) in Burnt Orange Spot, \$79, Table Tonic, and Batch cushion, \$31.90, Rapee. **3** Match pewter and ceramic bowl, \$289, Husk. **4** Siwa basket, \$33, Keme Mercantile.

Getty Images (paint roller)