



fishtales

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The Sydney Seafood School has ridden a 20-year wave of success.

The year was 1989. Australian food was emerging from its meat-and-three-veg roots and blossoming into the contemporary blend of Mediterranean and Asian flavours we now take for granted. Both home cooks and chefs thrilled to the recent arrival of a new fresh fish, Atlantic salmon, farmed in Tasmania. Aquaculture was in its infancy, yet hailed as the future. Meanwhile, the Sydney Fish Market (known then as the NSW Fish Marketing Authority) took up the challenge of teaching people about lesser-known fish species and how to cook them. So the Sydney Seafood School came into being.

The first class was "Microwaving with Seafood". How this skill took four two-hour classes to master remains a mystery but from the outset, the school gave some of Australia's emerging chefs the chance to showcase their talents to the public. One of the first was Peter Doyle, now at the three-hatted est., and over the next two decades a who's who of Australian cooking passed on their tips. Many, including Tetsuya Wakuda, Matt Moran and Neil Perry, are set to return to celebrate the school's 20th anniversary during November.

Roberta Muir has been the Seafood School's manager since 1997. Her ability to combine a busy program with top restaurant chefs means more than 12,000 people sign up annually to Australia's most successful cooking school. The best seller is the seafood barbecue class, attracting up to 300 people a month. Other classes, such as tapas, salt-and-pepper prawns and chilli crab, reflect current trends and tastes.

But tongs were downed over the past three months while Muir embarked on a major revamp of the school with help from restaurant-design guru Michael McCann (think Flying Fish and Pony). While the fish market proper grapples with how to fund a major redevelopment of the site after the NSW Government rebuffed calls for financial assistance, Muir has brought the school into the 21st century with a fresh, new look and state-of-the-art Fisher & Paykel appliances.

The walls of the demonstration classroom are lined with sea-green tiles made from Icelandic salmon skins. It looks a little like snakeskin and, up close, you can smell the briny oils. An LCD video system replaces the mirrors to capture the chefs' every move, while the expanded hands-on kitchen allows for more participants.

What excites Muir the most, though, is McCann's dramatic use of lighting. "The initial impression is that the kitchen is dark," she says, "but everyone will see perfectly as they cook."

Muir is heartened by the growing knowledge of consumers. "Twenty years ago, seafood such as octopus, cuttlefish, pipis and vongole were seen as exotic," she says. "And people are now far more aware of whether their seafood is farmed or wild." Also, the way we cook has changed. "Asian flavours are now much more in demand. A class starting in the Thai shops of Chinatown is among the most popular."

And while the new school has a microwave, 20 years on, most people know how to use it, even if it's not for seafood. For more information, go to sydneyfishmarket.com.au.