

Food for thought

Stephanie Bunbury, *The Age*, March 4 2002

Alicia Rios tells me she usually eats with her fingers, even though she is using a knife and fork now for courtesy's sake. "Being Mediterranean has made me very pantheistic," she says musingly. Apparently, we could all do with a bit more culinary pantheism; in children, Alicia says firmly, playing with food, feeling its textures, is essential to set off the digestive juices. Performance artist, cook, food historian and all-round livewire, Alicia Rios used to lecture in psychology at the University of Madrid before she took up food as her metier. Even now, as an artist, she is very much the scientist.

I go to meet Alicia at home in Madrid, late at night. Home is a flat on the eighth floor of a '60s apartment block with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lights of half the city. It is a bit James Bond, especially when your eye drifts to a leopard-skin-print chair or a large round laminex coffee table, but also a bit Edna Everage: Alicia is surrounded by plastic fish, straw dolls, drums with bullfighting scenes and bits of whimsical china, such as the dish shaped like a cut cantaloupe.

Then lift your eyes: we're in the groves of academe. Along with the Spanish-style kitsch, there are thousands of books in three languages and a vast collection of vinyl recordings running from Bach to Berg. This is civilised Europe, after all. As Alicia runs to catch the train next day, she sticks a handy book into her handbag: John Stuart Mill's diaries. To see the world with so much humour, perhaps, you must also treat it seriously.

She is certainly serious about food. Alicia Rios, 58, has lived alone since her husband died two years ago, but she always sets the table and eats well. As soon as I arrive, we sit down to artichokes stewed with zucchini and baked tomatoes; we drink very good Spanish wine and, just for me, there is a quail cooked in a delicious juice of onions, wine and herbs. "I will never eat in front of the fridge, never," she insists. "Because if you do not eat with proper regard for yourself, why bother with anything else?"

Alicia is coming to the Adelaide Festival with a piece called *The Edible Library*, billed as a "journey through 20 centuries of Spanish food history." The idea began, she says, with a vision of librarians in aprons covered in letters; in the show they will serve "readers" who can research and withdraw "books" containing samples of Spanish foods of the past. Choose the first century, or look up "dairy" in the Users' Manual index, and you will be able to "withdraw" a book that, once opened, reveals a dish containing strained, herbed cheese first recorded by Roman food historian Apicius. "I am always fascinated by this," says Alicia, "by trickery, by things that don't look like what they are."

Other choices include a full menu from a Jewish feast in Toledo in the 10th century, then the cultural capital of the country; a high tea with drinking chocolate as favoured by Charles V in the 16th century and a bourgeois meal of the late '50s. The final option, based on a recipe by Ferran Adria, is the "post-modern Spanish omelette" that deconstructs the traditional tortilla into its component ingredients of potato, egg white and yolk. "The taste is the same, but the textures, all the sensations are completely different," says Alicia. This offers a life lesson, in her view. "Being modern and

accepting that things are not interpreted once and for all. That things can be seen again and again in a different way.”

Bobby Baker, who brought one of her own food-based performances to the Melbourne Festival two years ago, was at a performance art conference in Wales where Alicia Rios presented a piece about gardening and harvesting. Guests had to gather their lunch from a fake loam of coffee grounds and plants constructed from a range of prepared foods. “I’ve never seen anything as lovely as the garden she did: so enchanting and beautifully executed and generous,” she says. “Generosity, that’s what I get from her to an extraordinary degree.”

“She’s so definitely Spanish, with that delight in gourmandising and sensuality... I’m a bit jealous of that genuine passion. Her work is not mean spirited, like English food can be. I measure out everything, it’s just innate... I think it reflects the difference between the Protestant and Catholic cultures. Her garden was like a fabulous Catholic church that, when you step in, is beyond your wildest dreams.”

Things Alicia likes, in no special order: dancing around the lounge room to salsa music with the cleaner, markets, bright colours, daily shopping, convivial meals, flamenco, exchanging recipes with other women in the dentist’s waiting room, very good olive oil, subsistence eating. Every Saturday, she goes walking in the mountains near Madrid and collects wild thyme and rosemary just as Apicius did.

The current moment is always important; it would be wrong to think of her work simply as historical research. “When you are eating something, you are eating feelings and discoveries and textures; you are eating culture in so many dimensions.”

One dimension is always humour. We shriek with laughter over her collection of packaging, over the sachets of Cristo food colouring adorned with a lurid picture of Christ bleeding in the crown of thorns, over the regional pimento tins with intricately painted logos - a patron saint, a couple of horses, or a Turkish odalisque on the ottoman - that announce their provenance. They are ghastly, but they are beautiful too. They are also definitively local, the aesthetic equivalent of the uncultivated thyme and rosemary, the popular culture made luridly manifest. Alicia likes them, certainly, very much.

Things Alicia doesn’t like: junk food, microwaves, ready-made meals and the toys you find in cereal packets in Anglo countries. “Food is becoming infantile. There must always be some silly creature with food. In Spain, Kellogg’s is Kellogg’s. There are no monsters to distract your attention. And the size of the things - chocolate bars like this.” She stretches her arms wide. “Or bags of potatoes you can’t lift.” Sizes that mean you don’t have to shop for another month. All that is anathema. I am quite surprised she has a freezer, even if it does mostly contain Magnum ice creams.

Alicia’s parents were liberals. Her father was a professor of geology who took the family on field expeditions, an intellectual who took it as read that his children would go to university; her mother, she says, a “hedonist” who just wanted her two daughters to be “pretty, happy and healthy”. Quite why these two should have sent young Alicia to school at the worst sort of convent, ruled by French nuns whose whole purpose was to prevent girls getting anywhere, is something of a mystery. Alicia cannot explain it. She just shrugs it off. For a psychologist, she is refreshingly uninterested in “baggage”.

It was the nuns, however, who unwittingly whetted her interest in food. Badly behaved girls were sent to work in the kitchen as punishment and Alicia, who was bad quite often, spent much of her school days chopping, peeling and stirring under the kindly guidance of the kitchen hands. "This was supposed to be the most horrible punishment, but it was paradise. There were nice smells and they were welcoming and warm. They would offer you a job – 'would you like to help me peel potatoes?'" It was just the opposite of the repression in the classroom with the horrible nuns and silly girls."

At university, Alicia studied philosophy, then psychology, then taught the history of psychology. Then, during the upheaval of a staff and student strike, she decided to leave and, to everyone's surprise, started a restaurant. "I had no experience and it was a sudden change, but at the same time I was following my passion. And I said yes, I have invested all these years in my academic life, but all this is in my mind."

She lasted six hard-working years, during which she laid the foundations for the surreal food events that have made her name. Dinner was never just dinner; you came to eat your way through something like the Seven Deadly Sins, with spaghetti arrabiata as anger and the Spanish equivalent of bacon and eggs as envy, because everyone wishes they had ordered it once they see it.

Now she performs, feeding people in such a way that she hopes they will look at life afresh, but food is still primarily about affection. She has spent the last couple of days, she says, making marmalade to give away as presents, despite the jaw-dropping list of things she must do in the four days before she leaves for Australia. And she still manages to squeeze in a night at a flamenco bar with me. Alicia loves flamenco, its rhythms and virtuosity and abandoned spirit of excess - performers in Andalucia, she tells me, often play till dawn rather than leave an eager crowd - but the strutting of the men still makes her laugh like a drain, just as we hooted at the Cristo food colouring. She is simply full of glee.

She has had a couple of boyfriends since Paco died, she tells me quite suddenly. When you have been so happily married, she says, you expect nothing but happiness; forming relationships is not as fraught as it is for people dragging around unresolved hurts. "But the more men I meet, the more I miss Paco," she says, smiling at the fact. "He was wonderful. A very independent person; he could cook and fix things, he had his own life." Other men see that she is capable of pretty much anything and think she can look after them. "But I think 'what use are you?'"

Her current interest, a retired architect, likes travel. They went to Marrakech recently and it was fun, but the problem is that he would like to spend his life taking impromptu holidays and she has her work. The cleaner relies on her for those salsa sessions. She is flat out, I think, just being alive. I remember that she said colour is important to her, but now I can't remember the colour of her walls. All I can say is that London, on my return, seems very grey indeed.

The Edible Library, 6pm, March 8, Charles Sturt Library, Adelaide.

CV: ALICIA RIOS SPANISH FOOD PERFORMANCE ARTIST AND CULINARY HISTORIAN

BORN: Madrid

CAREER: Author of several books on food history and works as a culinary consultant for many organisations including the International Olive Oil Council and the BBC.

LIVES: Madrid