



Q & A



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When Alfonso Alés entertains friends at home in Manly, it is with the generous spirit and flavours of his homeland.

i cook
a Spanish lunch

So, who is Alfonso Alés?

He's a wanderer, with a curriculum vitae that includes an A-list of top restaurants across Europe. The 36-year-old chef was born in Seville in southern Spain. "It's a very lively city; a lot of life happening on the streets and the whole tapas culture. Everything is about socialising." Alés's childhood was rich with politics, art, books and culture; his late father, Eugenio, was a lawyer and politician, a founding member of the first democratic government elected, in 1978, after the death of dictator General Franco.

Alés, one of five children, studied literature and philosophy at university but, in 1996, took a break to travel. In Australia chasing waves, he started to think about a career in food. On his return to Seville, he dropped out of university and went to hospitality school. Then, 3½ years later, he

took up his first job, as a chef de partie at the hotel of the fabled El Bulli. His start coincided with the boom in molecular cuisine and, for the next few years, it was the food he cooked at restaurants around Spain. "But I got bored with it," he says. "I don't think it has soul any more; people try to show off their skills more than please the customer. I thought they were taking the piss."

In 2006, Alés went to work for his mentor, Michel Guérard, the "all-round genius" who was a founder of the nouvelle cuisine movement in France in the '70s. "I found the style I was looking for." But after a year there and still restless, Alés returned to Sydney. He set up Postales Spanish restaurant at the GPO before spending 2½ years heading the Bilson's kitchen. He became head chef at Jonah's in June.

And what about Jonah's?

At Jonah's at Whale Beach, Alés is cooking "southern European" food with a strong Spanish influence.

Is there a signature dish?

A Basque-style dish – confit blue-eye with piquillo red peppers stuffed with brandade and garlic velouté.

At home, what are your essential ingredients?

Olive oil – a Spanish organic extra virgin oil called La Amarilla de Ronda from the south. "It has the right balance of acidity, sweetness and bitterness that I think is really good to use raw and it has a high smoking/burning point." Sherry vinegar and Murray River salt are also essentials.

Any special ideas for entertaining?

"I cook the food I was brought up with" – paella to meat stews. His memories are filled with seafood, especially fish stews, and gazpacho. "When you go to a friend's house, they always offer you a gazpacho glass or a beer."

What about food shopping?

For Spanish provisions, Alés likes El Mercado (72 Tennyson Road, Mortlake). At home, the couple uses only organic produce from Lettuce Deliver Organics (lettucedeliver.com.au). They get sourdough from La Banette in Avalon.

How about eating out?

Le Pelican (411 Bourke Street, Surry Hills) "It's food for the taste, not for showing off. The other day for my first anniversary with my wife, we went to Berowra Waters Inn – it's the best degustation in town."



Clockwise from left:
octopus á feira; sourdough toast with jamón ibérico and anchovies; Alfonso Alés's wife, Rebecca, and their daughter, Sophia; blue-eye trevalla in Basque salsa verde; Karen Lange; ajoblanco chilled soup; Alfonso and Sophia.



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Ajoblanco chilled soup
 500g blanched almonds,
 plus extra
 1.5 litres cold mineral
 water
 1 1/2 cloves garlic
 1 slice stale sourdough
 bread (about 1cm thick)
 150ml extra virgin olive oil
 2 tbsp sherry vinegar
 (or to taste)
 salt and pepper
 12 cooked prawns,
 peeled and deveined
 12 asparagus spears,
 trimmed, blanched
 and refreshed under
 cold water

Combine 500g almonds and mineral water in a bowl and soak overnight. The next day, place almond mixture, garlic and bread in a blender or food processor and process until smooth (this may need to be done in batches). Slowly add olive oil with motor running, then season with sherry vinegar, salt and pepper. To serve, ladle soup into serving bowls and garnish with prawns, asparagus and a few extra almonds.

Serves 6

Sourdough toast with jamón ibérico and anchovies

3 large slices
 sourdough bread
 1/2 clove garlic
 1 vine-ripened tomato
 200g jamón ibérico,
 thinly sliced
 12 anchovy fillets
 50ml extra virgin olive oil

Toast sourdough, then rub garlic lightly on toast. Cut tomato in half and rub it on toast. Top with ham and anchovies and drizzle with olive oil. Cut into fingers and serve.

Serves 6



Escalivada of roasted vegetables
 1 large eggplant, trimmed
 and halved lengthways
 4 cloves garlic, halved
 extra virgin olive oil
 sea salt and pepper
 1 small red onion, peeled
 2 ripe tomatoes
 2 large red capsicums
 sherry vinegar
 1/2 bunch chives, snipped
 1/2 bunch parsley, chopped

Preheat oven to 200°C. Make incisions in the eggplant halves with a small, sharp knife and push garlic into slits. Brush with olive oil and season with salt and pepper, then wrap each half in foil. Brush onion with olive oil, season and wrap in foil. Brush tomatoes and capsicums with oil, season and place in a roasting dish with foil-wrapped eggplant and onion. Bake until vegetables are tender (about 40 minutes for capsicum and tomatoes, and 50 minutes for eggplant and onion). When cool enough to handle, scoop flesh and garlic from eggplant. Peel and slice remaining vegetables, and combine in a bowl. Drizzle with olive oil and vinegar and add chives and half the parsley. Toss gently to combine and sprinkle with remaining parsley just before serving.

Serves 6



Octopus á feira
 40g salt
 1 bay leaf
 1kg frozen octopus tentacles
 500g large sebago potatoes, peeled
 sea salt
 sweet paprika
 100g black olives, sliced
 zest of ¼ preserved lemon, finely chopped
 2 tbsp snipped chives
 3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil with salt and bay leaf. Add octopus and whole potatoes and return to the boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 30-40 minutes or until octopus is tender and potatoes are cooked through. Refresh octopus under cold water and drain well. Slice potatoes, then cut into 3cm rounds. Cut octopus into pieces and place octopus slices on top of potato rounds. Sprinkle with salt and paprika. Scatter with olives, preserved lemon and chives, and drizzle with olive oil. (Reserve remaining octopus for another use.)

Serves 6

Blue-eye trevalla in Basque salsa verde

6 x 150g blue-eye trevalla fillets
 sea salt
 plain flour
 4 tbsp olive oil
 2 cloves garlic, chopped
 400g vongole (clams)
 500g fresh peas, podded
 1 cup fish stock or water
 chopped parsley, to garnish

Season fish with salt and dust skin side with flour, shaking off excess. Heat olive oil in a very large frying pan and add garlic. Add fish and cook for 3-4 minutes on each side (this may need to be done in batches). Remove fish and add vongole and peas to pan and cook for about 3 minutes or until vongole open. Return fish to pan with stock or water and cook for a few minutes until juices thicken slightly. Scatter with parsley.

Serves 6



Crème Catalan
 375ml pouring cream
 375ml full-cream milk
 half stick cinnamon
 finely grated zest of 1 orange
 120g caster sugar, plus extra
 12 egg yolks

Preheat oven to 150°C. Combine cream, milk, cinnamon and orange zest in a saucepan and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat and set aside for 5 minutes to allow flavours to develop. Combine 120g sugar and egg yolks in a bowl and whisk to combine. Strain cream mixture into sugar mixture and stir well. Divide mixture evenly among 6 150ml-175ml ovenproof dishes and place them in a baking dish. Pour hot water to come halfway up the sides of dishes and bake for 30 minutes or until just set. Remove and allow to cool, then refrigerate. To serve, sprinkle extra sugar over the top of each and caramelize with a blow torch.

Serves 6