

Sating a hunger for art

Jeff Martin gets back to his foodie roots with kitchen-inspired canvases. By Marleena Forward

In a world where sports stars rule and company CEOs rake in the cash, Jeff Martin is a rare beast. After 17 years of working in the hospitality industry, Martin is now a full-time artist, a position only a lucky few achieve in the arts industry.

Martin is not overawed by his success.

"If it's something you love to do, you'll find a way of doing it for a living," he says.

The Melbourne-based artist left school early to pursue a career in advertising – a job cut short by the 1987 stock market crash. Although Martin had always been interested in the visual arts, he didn't see it as a viable profession.

"When I first left school, I didn't think it was possible to make a living out of the arts. You just fall into something, and I fell into hospitality," he says.

He didn't fall for long. After working his way up from washing dishes to waiting tables to working as a cook, Martin became the owner of his own cafe.

After a 1999 trip to Favignana, a small island off the northwest coast of Sicily, Martin finally came to see his artwork as a serious career prospect. His first solo exhibi-

tion, *From Favignana*, sold out in Melbourne in 2004. He has been working as a professional artist ever since.

And three years later, he is going back to his foodie roots. The 2008 Melbourne Food and Wine Festival will showcase his third solo exhibition, a collection of works focusing on scenes from the kitchens of some of Melbourne's best-known restaurants.

Martin is palpably excited as he discusses his new series, and soon it becomes obvious that his 18-year affair with the food industry was more than just a casual fling.

"I don't think it's such a stretch to move from creating food to creating paintings," Martin says. "It's just a different ingredient, a different medium. I'm a person who creates work on a canvas that can be sold, and that's very similar to the work in hospitality – you put something on a plate and you sell it. That's the creative process. Every single person in each of these paintings is an artist in their own right."

If he weren't an artist, Martin is convinced he'd still be working in a kitchen.

"Food is very much contemporary art," he says. "A meal is consumed and people

walk away and they remember it or they don't remember it, and it is exactly the same with a painting.

"I can remember meals I've had years and years later, just like I can remember really good paintings that I've enjoyed."

The new show, which is still a work in progress, seems to be the perfect marriage between Martin's old and new lives.

"I have a number of friends in the hospitality industry who swing by the studio, and I always enjoy sitting back and watching the reactions," Martin says. "They're excited that somebody's captured their world."

And what about people who don't work in the industry? Does the exhibition have something to appeal to a wider audience?

"At the moment, if you're not eating at an open-kitchen restaurant such as Pearl or The Flower Drum you don't know what happens behind the scenes. Food just magically appears. I'm allowing the public to see behind the scenes of their favourite restaurants."

Jeff Martin's exhibition will show at Gould Galleries, 270 Toorak Road, South Yarra during the 2008 Melbourne Food and Wine Festival (February 22-March 8). Entry is free.



PETER WEAVING

Jeff Martin

Profession / Artist

Subject / Kitchens of Melbourne restaurants