



from the heart

Ana Ros risked more than her future when she turned her back on a diplomatic career. Now the self-taught chef is bringing the world to her door, writes **Julie Hosking**.



Local flavours Ana Ros's decision to cook with the ingredients on her doorstep has helped put Slovenia on the culinary map.

John Lennon was right: Love is the answer. Ana Ros knows that for sure. “When one is loved, she can create better, there is more passion, more beautiful thoughts,” the Slovenian chef says. “Because of love we do nice things and because of love, sometimes we create catastrophes.”

She is walking through the hills near her home in the Soca Valley, a place so impossibly picturesque you wouldn't be entirely shocked if the Von Trapp family burst around the corner, belting out “love is a flower, you got to let it grow” with Lennon and a bunch of dancing pixies.

This corner of Slovenia, as depicted in an episode of the documentary series *Chef's Table*, looks like something out of a fairytale, with misty mountains, turquoise waters, and lush forests and fields filled with hidden, edible treasures.

In many ways, Ana's story is rather magical. The story of a multilingual A-student destined for a career in diplomacy who defies her parents and follows her heart, a young woman who teaches herself to cook to such a high standard that if her restaurant were in another part of Europe she'd boast at least one Michelin star.

“It's a classical life story where life actually brings you up and down and offers so many challenges,” Ana tells me simply. “But if you're challenged, is that challenge the obstacle or is it the endgame?”

It's just afternoon when she answers the phone at the restaurant she runs with husband and sommelier Valter Kramar, a restaurant now lauded as a world-class destination thanks to a few well-placed champions at food magazines and attention from the influential folk behind the San Pellegrino restaurant awards. Her reputation was boosted further earlier this year, when she allowed *Chef's Table* cameras into her home.

Hisa Franko, where Ernest Hemingway is said to have written *A Farewell to Arms*, now draws visitors from far and wide – “there are more or less Australians every night” – for a taste of such gastronomic delights as pasta with liver, figs, hazelnuts and broccoli flower; mountain sheep's cheese ravioli, bone marrow, chanterelles and

langoustine; and peach, cucumber, puffed honey caramel and flower meringue.

Ana is eating simply today, however. “Just a salad with local tomatoes and a lot of chilli. And a glass of red wine, which is very good, and homemade bread – it's very civilised,” she says.

The small team stop for half an hour to eat lunch together before getting back to the business of making magic in the kitchen, which opens six evenings and weekends for lunch and dinner from March to November.

Ana has been cooking here for 16 years, a journey that began as a college student when her mother took her to the restaurant in western Slovenia, a few kilometres from the Italian border. She fell in love with the owner's son Valter, who was waiting tables, and the young couple went travelling. As Ana tasted new wines and food, she discovered there really was a whole other world out there.

“This way of living had a deep effect on me, it changed me,” she explains in *Chef's Table*. “It seemed my path was to leave everything from my childhood behind. I realised that living surrounded by rules can feel very restrictive. It's freedom that defines you.”

When Valter's father retired, leaving Hisa Franko to his son, Ana had a difficult choice. She had been offered a diplomatic job in Brussels but Valter needed her to run the kitchen at Hisa Franko. When she chose the latter, Ana's father stopped speaking to her.

There followed a difficult few years, financially and personally; the couple lost many of Hisa Franko's regular guests while home cook Ana tried to fight her way through “an abyss of ignorance” to master restaurant-quality dishes. In the midst of trying to keep the business afloat, they had two children, Svit, now 13, and Eva Klara, now 12.

Cooking wasn't so much a calling for Ana initially, as a puzzle she wanted to solve. She spent a lot of time experimenting on her guests – “unfortunately for them I made a lot of mistakes” – and read every cookbook she could get her hands on, learning and refining techniques, always asking questions.

It was a food critic friend's suggestion that she focus on local ingredients, however, that really lit the passion in her kitchen. Ana started to create dishes inspired by what was around her, such as the now-famous Tolmin cheese, which Valter ages in his cellar, and the marble trout that was saved from extinction by a few dedicated locals.

“Like the people of the Soca Valley, the trout have to fight to survive. That was my story as well,” she says in *Chef’s Table*. “I realised when I express the territory that my thoughts can travel. I was creating a philosophy and starting a new Slovenian story.”

This philosophy, she tells me, is why, despite her growing international reputation – one that has earned her an invitation to this year’s Margaret River Gourmet Escape – she couldn’t think of opening a restaurant anywhere else.

“I think the place and the moment in which you work is actually the thing that defines you most,” she says. “If I tried to do this kind of cuisine in maybe London it would be completely different.”

Besides not having “enough power” to open restaurants around the world, Ana thinks guests deserve to be fed by the chef they’ve come to discover.

“I believe it is important to be in the restaurant so that people can, not see you, but can really understand that your work, your personality influences their experience,” she says. “Because if you continue not to be here then it is actually not your kitchen anymore; it’s kind of fake.”

The chef, who describes her journey in the kitchen as an ongoing evolution, is looking forward to

making new discoveries and “learning a lot” on her first visit to Australia next month.

As this is traditionally the time they have a holiday – “we really need to leave the house if we want to be off” – the whole family is coming. Valter is looking forward to sampling some Margaret River wine, the kids are pumped about the waves.

“They are dying at the idea of going surfing there – they are both quite good surfers,” says the former ski champion. “Yesterday they were googling Margaret River, so they are going to be great ambassadors for the place.”

Perhaps not as great as Ana has been for Slovenia. Many critics credit her with putting the small country on the culinary map, championing local producers along the way. While she admits to feeling proud of what she’s achieved sometimes, she hasn’t totally abandoned thought of her first career.

“Sometimes I’m so tired I wake up in the morning and say ‘wouldn’t it be great to do some diplomatic work’;” she says, with a laugh. “Some days I wake up in the morning and I say ‘what’s next’, I could continue like that for the next 15, 20 years ... but you have to have a plan for your future. Who knows, maybe I could be president, it could be an interesting challenge. Don’t worry, that is a pure joke!”

One suspects she’s done more for Slovenia in the kitchen than she could ever have done in political circles. More importantly for Ana, her parents came around to her choice. Her father Bojan describes his daughter’s success as “an amazing, beautiful surprise”; his acceptance clearly means the world.

“I never meant to hurt my parents but my need to be true to myself and my sense of duty to my parents were fighting a battle,” she says. “And I chose my heart.” And the heart eventually triumphed. Says her mother Katja: “Truly, with love you can accomplish anything.” [www](#)



Ana’s Lunch of Earthly Delights is sold out but you can catch her at Brunch with the Best, in the Gourmet Village, or watch her in *Chef’s Table* under the stars. See gourmetescape.com.au.

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