

San Anselmo poet, artist stirs it up

Leslie Harlib

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Prartho Sereno, 60, has a cloud of curly hair as white as marshmallows that looks as soft as Santa Claus' beard.

Under those swirls of white, the San Anselmo-based poet, artist and teacher has a whimsical mind that has fixated on basic kitchen utensils such as knives, forks and spoons. In an unusual self-published and self-illustrated book of poems, "Causing a Stir: The Secret Lives & Loves of Kitchen Utensils," Sereno celebrates and elevates these homely objects, turning them into personalities through language and paintings.

"I am a lover of man's inventions, in particular tools," says Sereno (the name Prartho, given to her by a spiritual teacher, means "prayer" or "gratitude"). "For instance, I have a great fondness for my paintbrushes, because I've often sat with a paintbrush and thought, 'who invented this, and how long has this been going on?' I also feel that way about every kitchen utensil. They're perfect for what they do."

Sereno believes her book of poems is also a metaphor for human behavior.

"When it comes to us, our uniqueness, we often judge or put each other down," she muses. "When looking at the creations of man, such as tools, we can appreciate uniqueness and how wonderful it is to have a fork with its tines and spatula with its flatness and a ladle with its big roundness. And extrapolate that into our natures."

Sereno's slim book, which took her four years to paint and write and which she ended up self-publishing through her company Mansarovar Press, was released Oct. 1. It's her second; her first,



Pastry blender (Provided by Prartho Sereno)

"Everyday Miracles," published by Kensington Press in 1998, was a collection of inspirational essays.

"Causing a Stir" is charming. On one page may be

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an illustration of a spoon, a knife, a fork, a tea ball. Faces - many of them people Sereno knows and loves, such as her granddaughters, daughters, boyfriend - are superimposed on each utensil so it



(Provided by Prartho Sereno)

comes alive. On a facing page is the poem that describes the essence of each tool.

"In the beginning, I used generic faces," Sereno explains. "As the book moved along, it became a tribute to people."

The poems are a far cry from Edward Lear's

"The Owl and the Pussycat" from 1871, in which he immortalizes a "runcible spoon," or the Mother Goose rhyme in which a lovelorn dish runs away with a spoon.



Salad spoons (Provided by Prartho Sereno)

Sereno's imagination pictures a dinner knife like this: "Of clean line and simple design, straight as the unbent arrow, the Prince of Understatement stands cool and tall in the kitchen's heat." She writes of a soup spoon as "grandmother of the top drawer." Salad servers, topped with the heads of herself and her boyfriend, Sereno describes as "emissaries from the lost realm of harmony. Man and

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woman, together and alone."

A former head chef at a vegetarian restaurant in Oregon as



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well as a former college professor with a master's degree in counseling psychology, Sereno says the kitchen has always been deeply important to her.

"The book to me has the quality of the kitchen, which is a warm-hearted meeting place for us; we share that room. So I love that fact. That's partly why the book works on all levels; we can all relate to it because the kitchen is a place where we all love to be," she says.

Her project started sizzling with the soup spoon poem, which grew out of a poetry assignment Sereno had given to students at Tam High.

"I so enjoyed the personality I created for the soup

spoon, I thought, 'What about the fork?' I had a longtime secret desire to illustrate a book. This became the obvious vehicle for that; I did a painting to go with each poem."

For Sereno, who in her varied life spent several years in India (where she frequently goes to paint and meditate), the book is yet another attempt to reinvent herself. She has worked full-time as a poet in the schools for eight years, currently teaching first- through 12th-graders in 15 schools throughout Marin County. She also teaches in such different venues as Juvenile Hall and in Doodlebug, an arts and crafts store in San Anselmo where she will give a reading of "Causing a Stir" on Saturday night.

"I love the book," says Marnie Delaney, who owns Doodlebug and regularly hires Sereno to teach children's classes in drawing and painting. "I think it's something really different. It comes from a really creative mind. The poetry is great, but I love the illustrations."

The start of Dungeness crab season will be celebrated Friday, Nov. 30, by Slow Food San Francisco with a Portugese-style dinner featuring locally caught crab prepared by Google chef Nate Keller. Fine wines and local beer will be served with dinner. Delegates from Terra Madre as well as Bay Area fishermen will be present. Terra Madre is a gathering of 5,000 small-scale farmers, fishermen, herders and artisan producers from around the world, that takes place biannually in Turin, Italy. The evening's proceeds will send local fishermen to Terra Madre 2008. Tickets are \$60, \$100 for VIP (which includes special culinary gift bag and seating at the Terra Madre delegate table). For reservations, call 800-838-3006 or go to www.brownpapertickets.com.

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Acclaimed chef and best-selling cookbook author Alice Waters will be at the Cost Plus World Market store at 2040 Redwood Highway in Greenbrae from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 1. She will be signing copies of her latest book, "The Art of Simple Food," which will be available for sale. Cost Plus World Market will donate all net proceeds from book sales to the Chez Panisse Foundation. For more information, call 924-7743.

Caring Through Cooking, a series of four gourmet cooking classes with local chef and caterer Jeffrey Kirshbaum, will benefit Hospice by the Bay (formerly Hospice of Marin). The first class, "Holiday Comfort Food," will be at 6 p.m. Dec. 6 at Congregation Rodef Sholom, 170 N. San Pedro Road in San Rafael. Additional classes will be on March 13 ("The Italian Table"), June 26 ("Summer Brunch") and Sept. 11 ("Fall Harvest"). Each class is \$100 and includes a hands-on cooking demonstration and printed recipes, followed by a gourmet dinner with wines.

For information or reservations, contact Hospice by the Bay Foundation at 526-5500 or go to www.thebenefit.info.

Leslie Harlib writes about food and restaurants on Wednesdays. You can call her at 382-7340, send a fax to 884-1478, an e-mail to lharlib@marinij.com, or write to her c/o of the IJ, P.O. Box 6150, Novato 94948-6150.

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