



LUNCH WITH
VALERIE TAYLOR

Discovering happiness underwater

Valerie Taylor says she's had the best life of anyone she knows, writes **Mark Dapin**.

Pioneering Australian underwater photographer Valerie Taylor knows her fish. The woman who helped film the shark sequences in *Jaws* guides me through every species on the blackboard menu at Garfish in Manly, beginning with the salmon.

"Atlantic salmon isn't from the Atlantic," says Taylor, 82, "it's from Tasmania. 'Stargazer': well, I don't think you should spear them. 'Barramundi': if it's fresh, it'll be delicious; if it's farmed, it'll be horrible. And 'goldband snapper': well... I don't know what a goldband snapper is. The snapper family is the biggest fish family in the world. There's over 100 species, and I'm always very careful because there are only about 10 species that are good to eat."

She settles for the euphonious "Uludulla mahi mahi". How to her piscine knowledge and order the same. Taylor is entertaining company. When she was younger, she sailed the waters of the world with her husband, the late Ron Taylor, photographing and filming their adventures for magazines, movies and TV.

As well as *Jaws*, the Taylors worked on the movies *Orca*, *Jaws 2*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Return to the Blue Lagoon* and at least a dozen others. Their oeuvre also includes decades of documentaries, from *Playing with Sharks* (1962) to *Shadow of the Shark* (1999) - perceptive readers may begin to discern a pattern. For decades, the couple were internationally famous, so I apologise for asking Taylor questions she must have answered scores of times before, such as what did her parents do for a living.

"No, I've never been asked what my parents did," she says. The serious attention must have all gone to Ron, "the shark man".

Taylor was born in Crown Street, Sydney, but at the age of three moved to Wellington, New Zealand, where her father was involved in opening a battery factory. "We lived in a state commission house that backed on to the railway workshop in Lower Hut," she says. "I had a great childhood. I never knew we were poor. Terrible weather - but I never knew that until I came here."

She was always a keen painter and, after she lost years of education to polio, she left school at 15 and took a job as an animator at the National Film Unit. The next year, her family returned to Australia, and she found work as an illustrator and comic-strip artist.

In the protectionist Australia of the 1950s, the government was reluctant

to allow the import of goods that could be made at home. These included American comics, which had to be redrawn by local artists before they could be published in Australia.

"Without that law, I would not have had a job," says Taylor. "It was very hard for me to get work anyway, because most artists in the commercial field were men. I answered a job for a male."

Did they employ her because the comics industry was comparatively liberal? "No," she says, "they gave it to me because I was very beautiful and the boss said, 'You're the best-looking male I've seen all day'. But you had to have a folio of work. He didn't just look at my face."

Taylor went through comic strips such as *L'il Abner*, panel by panel, redrawing the pine trees as gum trees.

Living in a waterfront house in Port Hacking, she became an accomplished spearfisher, and she taught herself to scuba dive with equipment given to her by a neighbour. She joined the St

George Spearfishing Club, where she met Ron. He was the men's champion, she the women's. They married in 1963.

Val and Ron turned away from spearfishing when they realised they had stripped an entire reef of fish. They moved into underwater photography, using equipment they had built themselves.

"We zeroed in on sharks," says Taylor. "It was difficult, but nobody else was doing it, so we had the field to ourselves. Nowadays, it's a big thing: 'I'm a diver, I'm going to dive with sharks.' Back then, it was, 'You idiot!'"

Our mahi mahi arrives and meets with Taylor's educated approval and my ignorant appreciation. Taylor takes lunch with a glass of sauvignon blanc. "I'm not an alcoholic," she assures me. "I've had a hell of a week."

She has been promoting conservation



"It was difficult, but nobody else was doing it": Valerie Taylor on beginning her work on sharks. Photo: Steven Siewert

film *Blue*, to raise awareness about plastics in the ocean (politicians in Canberra were "unbelievably receptive" to the movie's message, she says) as well as launching her children's book *Melody the Mermaid: Adventures in the Kingdom of the Sea*.

Taylor never stopped painting and the book contains a year's worth of her pictures, which she says are accurate representations of marine life, except for the mermaid. She never stopped diving either and, the day after our lunch, she is heading off for a 14-day trip to Indonesia. Diving is easier than walking, she says - "No gravity. You could just get out of this chair, fly across the road and up the street" - but the publicity work exhausts her.

She says she has had the best life of anyone she knows, and her "great adventure" was making the documentary *Blue Water, White Death*. It was released in 1971 and featured Ron and Val taking increasingly life-threatening risks to film great white sharks. "The average person would have died in the first week," she says.

Valerie Taylor being bitten by a blue shark off San Diego while testing a steel mesh suit.



Blue Water, White Death led the Taylors to their work on *Jaws*, for which they shot the real-life shark footage and also helped to design the artificial shark. Ron went to the US to advise the film-makers, she says: "Because their shark was 24 feet long, and the average for our live sharks is 12, everything was half-size, to make our shark look big. We had a half-size cage, a half-size man."

The Taylors made money, first from syndicating their documentaries around the world, then from Hollywood. They bought a mansion in East Roseville. "This place was magic," Taylor says. "The foyer was as big as most people's homes. Ridiculous."

Their last movie was *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, released in 1996. They returned to TV work, and they used to be in demand to comment on sharks for current-affairs shows. Taylor says the producers don't ask her any more because all they want to hear about are the dangers of sharks.

"I don't say they're good and sweet and kind," she says, "but I do tell the truth, and they're not swimming around the ocean looking for someone to eat."

The Taylors moved out of their mansion about 10 years ago, and into a three-bedroom unit in Fairlight. Ron died in 2012, and Val now shares the apartment with a friend.

She remains a fascinated admirer of marine life and, in every sense, someone who knows her fish.

"Every shark has its own personality," she says, "every fish. Eels have very different personalities. Even crabs have their own personality."

How on earth can you tell the personality of a crab?

"Getting to know it," Taylor says. Of course.

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