

With his show and restaurant, Mario's cookin'

By ADAM BUCKMAN

AMERICAN-BORN chef Mario Batali grew up in Seattle and then Madrid — so why is he so crazy about Italian food?

"Because our family had a tradition of Italian-style cooking since I was born," says Mario, 36, whose TV Food Network show, "Molto Mario," airs four times every weekday (1 p.m., 4 p.m., 9 p.m. and 1 a.m.). "Our traditional New Year's Day was to watch football and then make enough sausage to last the whole year."

Making homemade sausage was only the beginning for Batali, whose culinary career started at a pizza-and-calzone emporium in New Brunswick, N.J., called Stuff Your Face. Now, after stops in London, San Francisco, Santa Barbara and Bologna, he's running his own 34-seat restaurant — Po, on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village — and demonstrating the art of Italian cooking on TV.

For Mario, hosting his own TV show has at least two benefits: It raises the profile of his restaurant, and also allows him to indulge in one of his favorite pastimes — expounding on Italian food.

"I like the idea of TV," he says. "It gives us a larger customer base than we would normally have. The chef-celebrity stuff is enjoyable, but the main reason I enjoy it is I get to really work at my craft. I really get to explain the things that I really enjoy. I really like talking about it."

And talking he does, non-stop, for



Chef Mario Batali puts the finishing touches on an Italian dish on a recent edition of "Molto Mario," the show he hosts every weekday on the TV Food Network.

New York Post: Tamara Beckwith

the length of his half-hour show — about the food, its fresh ingredients, its regional origins.

Batali spends one week a month shooting multiple programs far in advance of their airdates.

Each show is generally split into three segments — each of which are devoted to the preparation of a single dish. As with other TV Food Network shows, some of the food preparation (such as chopping) and cooking is done off-screen by a team

of assistant chefs in an elaborate kitchen.

But many of the dishes Batali cooks on "Molto Mario" are in fact cooked by him in real time, within the seven minutes allotted for a segment. He concedes that he's able to do that because he's a really proficient chef, and also because of the simplicity of Italian cooking.

"When I lived in Italy," he says, referring to the three-and-a-half years he spent cooking at a tiny restaurant in a hillside village between Bologna and Florence, "the single most important thing that I learned is that Italians rarely put five or six things on one plate, unless it's an antipasto. Real Italian food is much more simple than Americans could possibly imagine."

It's so simple, says Mario, that the average viewer possesses the ability to reproduce what the chef prepares on TV.

"Italian food is the cuisine of grandmas, not of professional chefs," he says. "It's doesn't take some 10-year apprenticeship to make Italian food. It's taught to you by your grandmother. Their chopping and other techniques aren't something that it takes a rocket scientist to understand — not that grandmas aren't rocket scientists, but grandmas made things that were real."

Batali wants his fans to come away from "Molto Mario" with a greater appreciation of Italian culture, what he calls "a culture of eating . . . and appreciation of life."

Says Mario, "That's really important to me. It's what I dig most."

Mario's secret sauce recipe

Here's Mario Batali's own recipe for basic tomato sauce:

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 Spanish onion, diced into 1/4-inch pieces
- 4 cloves of garlic, thinly sliced
- 3 ounces virgin olive oil
- 4 tablespoons fresh thyme (or 2 tablespoons dried)
- 1/2 medium carrot, finely shredded
- 2 28-ounce cans of tomatoes, crushed and mixed well with their juices

Salt to taste

PREPARATION:

Saute the onion and garlic in the olive oil over medium heat until translucent, but not browned (about 10 minutes).

Add the thyme and carrot and cook 5 minutes more. Add the tomatoes. Bring to a boil, lower the heat to just bubbling, and then stir occasionally for 30 minutes.

Season with salt to taste. Serve immediately, or set aside for further use. The sauce may be refrigerated for up to one week or frozen for up to 6 months.

Yield: 6 cups

Source: Chef Mario Batali, Po Restaurant, 31 Cornelia Street, Manhattan