

98-5803

Ruth Reichl

A Radical Departure With Sure Footing



Linda Rosier for The New York Times

NOTHING ORDINARY At Babbo, a casual trattoria in Greenwich Village, culinary gambles usually pay off.

MARIO BATALI and Joseph Bastianich are not playing it safe.

They have taken one of the city's most beloved old restaurants, the Coach House on Waverly Place, and completely gutted its interior. James Beard, the celebrated food writer, would have a hard time finding anything in this spare, casual trattoria to remind him of the restaurant of Early American fare he once loved.

Mr. Batali's menu isn't safe, either. He has loaded it with dishes that Americans are not supposed to like. Fresh anchovies and warm testa (that's head cheese) are among the appetizers, and pastas include bucatini with octopus, and ravioli filled with beef cheeks and topped with crushed squab livers. A big bowl of squid constitutes one main course, and sweetbreads with bacon is another. Lambs' tongues and calf's brains are frequent specials.

Meanwhile Mr. Bastianich has created an entirely Italian wine list filled with names that are unfamiliar to most Americans. "Try it," you hear him urging his customers, "if you don't like it, I'll drink it myself." He isn't serving wine by the glass, either; he is serving quartinos (250 milliliters, or a third of a bottle).

Even the service is eccentric. When the meal ends, the table is swept free of crumbs with a serving spoon. People tease Mr. Bastianich about this but he does not seem to

care. "It's how they do it in Italy," he shrugs. "I like the way it looks."

In a time when chances are rarely taken, when menus are made by focus groups and too many restaurants cater to the bottom line, Babbo is a breath of fresh air. Risk-taking restaurants tend to feed the very wealthy, but Babbo is meant for those in the middle: it is moderately priced with two seven-course tasting menus at less than \$50 each.

Mr. Batali is a celebrated chef with a television show on the Food Network and a popular restaurant, Pó; Mr. Bastianich owns Felidia, Becco and Frico with his mother, Lidia Bastianich. Seasoned restaurateurs, they have the courage to trust their customers.

Order the marinated, fresh anchovies with summer beans and you will instantly understand that you can trust them back. The tender, pungent little fish fillets taste nothing like those things that come in cans. Mackerel tartare is terrific, too, the fish so fresh it has a sweetness you do not associate with this ordinarily oily variety. And summer lettuces with a black olive and blood orange vinaigrette has an appealing bitterness that gives lettuce an entirely new character.

In place of the antipasto table that has become such a restaurant cliché, Mr. Batali serves plates of cured meats with fruits or vegetables. Sopressata from the great, old Greenwich Village pork store,

Faiccò, comes with roasted beets and shaved fennel. Spicy capocollo meat is served with raw artichokes and pecorino cheese. And prosciutto appears in the form of fettunta, which is Tuscan for "bruschetta."

There are, I might mention, two antipastos that are less successful. Braised artichokes with goat cheese and roasted peppers is surprisingly lackluster, and marinated portobello mushrooms with sticks of grilled polenta is dry in the mouth.

The pastas, however, are universally impressive. My all-time favorite is a ravioli that tastes like clouds wrapped in tender sheets sprinkled with fragrant flowers of sage and thyme. The clouds, in this case, turn out to be calf's brains, and they are extraordinary. Mint love letters with spicy lamb sausage are small, explosively flavorful little packets. The beef cheek ravioli is intense, too, and very rich. Other hits have been a special, a linguine tossed with broccoli rape and sheep's milk cheese that emphasized the bitterness of the vegetable and the simple ragù.

I like Mr. Batali's pastas so much that I am always tempted by his pasta tasting menu: five different pastas followed by two desserts. But I cannot imagine a meal at Babbo that did not include the calamari. Spicy, robust and simplicity itself, the two-minute calamari tastes absolutely wonderful. Eating it, I always imagine myself on a wind-swept beach in Sicily. Wild striped bass in

Babbo

★★★

110 Waverly Place (Avenue of the Americas), Greenwich Village. (212) 777-0303.

ATMOSPHERE: Small, spare and intimate, this attractive trattoria has little to remind you it was once the Coach House.

SERVICE: Attentive, careful and friendly.

SOUND LEVEL: High.

RECOMMENDED DISHES: Marinated fresh anchovies, summer lettuces in black olive-blood orange vinaigrette, sopressata with roasted beets, beef cheek ravioli with crushed squab liver, calf's brains ravioli with sage and oregano flowers, mint love letters, pappardelle Bolognese, spicy calamari, barbecued squab, grilled lamb chops, wild striped bass in preserved lemon broth, ice cream and sorbet, cherry crostata, saffron pannacotta with poached peaches.

WINE LIST: Focused on Italy, it is unusual and fairly priced.

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers, \$7 to \$11; main courses, \$15 to \$25; desserts \$8; seven-course pasta tasting menu, \$43; seven-course traditional tasting menu \$49.

HOURS: Tuesday to Saturday, 5:30 to 11:30 P.M.; Sunday, 4 to 9:30 P.M.; closed Monday.

CREDIT CARDS: All major.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY: Main dining room and restrooms at street level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

- (None) Poor to satisfactory
- ★ Good
- ★★ Very good
- ★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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preserved lemon broth is also transporting, and tiny grilled lamb chops "scottaditi" (meant to be eaten with the fingers) are a treat. Barbecued squab with farro (a grain) cooked with golden beets is superb.

Babbo is such a wine-oriented restaurant that it is tempting to order a plate of cheese at the end of the meal. This is an excellent idea, so long as you save room for dessert. The ice creams and sorbets are impressive. The ice creams are creamy and concentrated; the sorbets are so powerfully flavored that each spoonful tastes like a bite of frozen fruit.

Satisfying as these are, the best ending to a meal at Babbo is saffron pannacotta with poached peaches. It is like the restaurant itself: an unusual combination of ingredients that seem destined to be together.