

Molto Mario

BY USING REGIONALLY AVAILABLE INGREDIENTS AND KEEPING HIS DISHES "SIMPLE", MARIO BATALI SHOWS HIS PATRONS THAT WHEN IT IS DONE RIGHT EVEN LOCAL FARE IS EXOTIC. *By Ann Volkwein*



"Perfectly cooked spaghetti even tastes good with Campbell's soup as a sauce."

SPAGHETTI. TO HEAR CHEF MARIO BATALI speak of this exalted Italian staple, is like listening to an ode. "Perfectly cooked spaghetti is a reason unto itself. Perfectly cooked spaghetti even tastes good with Campbell's soup as a sauce."

The 37-year-old Chef—star of the Food Network's *Molto Mario* and Mediterranean *Mario*, and owner of the five-year-old *Pó* and just-opened *Babbo*, (both New York restaurants)—is rapt with the season's bounty these days as well. On his days off you can find him tromping 'round the grounds of his father-in-law's Coach Dairy Goat Farm in upstate New York (of goat cheese fame). Up at the farm, he likes to cook up "barbecued chicken and spaghetti with whatever vegetable my wife is growing in her perfect garden." Mario was raised in Seattle and eastern Washington in a family that held to the Italian tradition of "following the seasons and enjoying the bounty of whatever was around."

He explains, "That's what my family was all about. When it was blackberry season we'd take the station wagon and fill it with blackberries, come home and can 'em, make pies, make jelly etc. and have them for the whole year. We'd do the same in strawberry season, blueberry season, pear season and cucumber season for pickles."

Everyone cooked in the Batali household. This influenced Mario to eventually become a Chef, but not before getting degrees in Spanish and Economics from Rutgers University in New Jersey. Never far from the stove, of course, he worked his way through college cooking at a popular pizzeria called *Stuff Your Face*. After graduating, Mario decided to follow his culinary calling. And after a brief stint at London's *Cordon Bleu* in 1984, he wound his culinary way through France, California, Northern Italy and finally to New York via Florida in 1992.

Mario opened *Pó* in 1993, and *Babbo* this past

This page: An appetizing presentation of Five Tomato Salad with Opal Basil and Grilled Squash Blossoms. Recipes, page 20. Opposite page: Mario Batali at his newly opened Babbo of New York.



COLLE MAR

Chardonnay (Poggio del lupo) 5⁰⁰
Chardonnay (Borgo Magriato) 6⁰⁰
Montepulciano d'Abruzzo
(FARNESE) 5⁰⁰
Sangiovese (Rosso Conero) 5⁰⁰
... Classico (MAZZI) 6⁰⁰

D^o

Spring. Babbo is 'Daddy' in Italian—aptly named for a Chef with two little sons. Mario describes the menu at Babbo as having “creative interpretations of Italian-style cooking”. And as compared to Pó, he sees Babbo as “having a little bit more expensive ingredients, being a little more elegant, and maybe even a little more simple.”

Simple? Mario proclaims, “My credo would be ‘simplicity rules over-all, and perfect technique is what you base it on.’”

What some people call “haute complexity” in a dish, Mario calls “over-crowded plate.” Sounds like a syndrome, doesn't it?

To help the home cook avoid such atrocities, Mario has authored a cookbook titled *Cooking in Two Villages* (Clarkson Potter) to be published this October. The two villages refer to the village Mario cooked in in Italy for three years and Greenwich Village, home to his two restaurants. In his book Mario explores the spirit of Italian cooking as it translates into the American market. As Mario explains, “I don't import expensive ingredients. Just like Italian cooks in Venice don't bring things in from Rome very often, Roman cooks cook with the ingredients of the gardens

“My credo would be ‘simplicity rules over-all, and perfect technique is what you base it on’,” says Mario.

“Haute complexity” in a dish, is what this creative chef calls “over-crowded plate.”

around them.” Expressing the regional style of cooking in Italy is Mario's method of encouraging Americans to use their own local ingredients in his recipes, and any recipe they come across.

Next time you are in Mario's Village, you might stop by Pó or Babbo, and experience his brand of elegant simplicity and big flavor. ■

ANN VOLKWEIN lives and works in New York City where she is a culinary assistant for cable television's immensely popular Food Network.

Mario's Indian Summer Menu

- * FIVE TOMATO SALAD WITH OPAL BASIL AND GRILLED SQUASH BLOSSOMS
- * GNOCCHI WITH A DUCK BACON AMATRICIANA
- * BARBECUED FLANK STEAK WITH DRAGON TONGUE BEAN SALAD WITH CHIOGGA BEETS AND SALSA VERDE
- * LEMON CURD GELATO WITH BLACKBERRIES, RASPBERRIES AND CHIANTI



GNOCCHI WITH A DUCK BACON AMATRICIANA

(Recipe courtesy Mario Batali)

- 4 tablespoons virgin olive oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped into 1/2-inch dice
- 1/4 pound duck bacon, cut into 1/4-inch dice
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- 2 cups Basic Tomato Sauce
- 1 pound gnocchi
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 1/4 pound freshly grated Pecorino cheese

Bring 6 quarts of water to a boil and add 2 tablespoons salt. In a large 12- to 14-inch saute pan heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onion, duck bacon and saute until the onion is translucent and very soft, about 8 to 10 minutes. Add the red pepper flakes and tomato sauce and bring to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer for about 5 minutes. Remove from heat. Add the gnocchi to the boiling water and cook

according to the package directions. Drain the pasta in a colander over the sink. Pour the hot pasta into the sauce pan. Return the pasta mixture to the stove and cook for about 1 minute longer, mixing thoroughly. Pour the pasta into a heated serving dish, sprinkle with lots of grated cheese and serve immediately.

Yield: 4 servings

BASIC TOMATO SAUCE

(Recipe courtesy Mario Batali)

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

Saute the onion and garlic in the olive oil over medium heat until translucent, but not brown (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, stirring 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

Luna Sil!
Where
the Stars
Come Out!

Chef Albert Luna Creates
the South's most celebrated
Spanish Fusion Cuisine.

Dinner served nightly
from 5:30 pm.
Closed Sundays.

(404) 355-5993



Located conveniently between
Buckhead and Midtown at
2932 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia