

**CHEF OF MERIT:  
SETTING THE STANDARD**

## MARIO BATALI

When Mario Batali arrived in Manhattan 11 years ago, he had \$250 in his pocket, some old T-shirts in a bag, and a passion for making the best Italian food possible. Now he has four prominent restaurants, two popular cooking shows, three cookbooks—and he hasn't lost the passion.

This Seattle boy dropped out of London's Le Cordon Bleu in 1985 and worked for Britain's Marco Pierre White—"a genius," he says, "and the first one I ever saw work out of the box with presentation and conception." Batali then cooked in several big-time California kitchens before he decided to give it all up and work for free at a tiny trattoria in Emilia-Romagna. Moving to New York in 1992, he opened Po before making a huge splash with Babbo in 1998. Five years later, Batali keeps tabs on his restaurants—Esca, Lupa, Otto, and the three-star Babbo—attired in his uniform of shorts and orange Converse sneakers (which match the color of his ponytailed hair).

So how does Batali maintain quality, plan a new restaurant (a tapas bar due to open later this year), and find family time? "I have cultivated a group of very talented people who work with me to do the best we can do," says Batali. "We strive to satisfy the customer with food that is tasty, provocative, and comforting." His advice to young, ambitious chefs is simple: "Work for free to learn from the greats." Guess Batali will soon be inundated with interns. ➤

