

Loose Change

CHECK OUT

Ciao Hound

Celeb chef Mario Batali blitzes 7-Eleven and finds the fixins for a hearty three-course meal.

Just because Mario Batali is an award-winning chef, star of two cooking shows, *Molto Mario* and *Mario Eats Italy*, and co-owner of three posh Manhattan eateries doesn't mean he's a food snob. In fact, his latest venture is the family- and wallet-friendly Otto Enoteca Pizzeria in Greenwich Village. So we weren't surprised when the big guy eagerly accepted the *Budget Living* shopping challenge to spend \$20 at a 7-Eleven in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. We were shocked, though, that he came in so far under budget, carefully choosing the foodstuffs below to create a three-course meal for a measly \$13. And even though Batali hadn't seen the inside of a 7-Eleven in years, he was instantly at ease, holding court and signing autographs for locals, who were stunned to get a celebrity sighting along with their Big Gulps. —L.P.



Appetizers & aperitif

Early in our adventure, Batali confessed that one of his favorite snacks is a slice of yellow American cheese "drenched in Tabasco sauce." So this Slim Jim spiked with the spicy stuff was just the thing to kick off his meal. To wash it down, Batali chose a carton of banana-flavored reduced-fat milk emblazoned with a picture of Tweety Bird. "When everyone else is having Campari and soda, I'll be enjoying this as my *aperitivo*," he said. Finally, a selection of celery and carrot Dipstix with ranch dressing offers a "healthy" finish.



Main course

After pondering the gastrointestinal implications of a burrito called "The Bomb," Batali decided that this meaty 14-ounce beast filled with beef, cheese sauce, beans, and green chilies would be "the main event." "The package says the burrito's been 'previously handled,'" said Batali. "That's my worry. But I guess that just means someone folded it up." To add roughage to the mix, Batali splurged on a container of fresh fruit. Peering into the bowl, he said, "I love grapefruit, I love oranges...and I'm not sure what that gray one is."



Cheese course & dessert

Dismissing Cracker Barrel cheddar as "too fancy," Batali put two Twist-Ums mozzarella-and-cheddar sticks (69 cents each) on the menu as "the cheese course—enough said." He then picked up the exotic-sounding Koala's March Chocolate Creme cookies only to learn that they hail from Battle Creek, Michigan. Batali's cheapest item—striped wafer rolls, three for a buck—was also his favorite once he discovered they were made by Brooklyn's own Yohay Baking Company. "I love that," he said. "Yo! Hey, bakery, wazzup? A shout out to all my friends down the bakery!"

THE RECEIPT

Slim Jim	\$.99
Banana milk	\$1.29
Dipstix	\$2.79
Burrito	\$1.99
Fruit	\$2.69
Wafers	\$.99
Cookies	\$.89
Cheese	\$1.38
TOTAL	\$13.01
(tax not included)	

BATALI PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY STAMOLIS; PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVEN FREEMAN