

Babbo: Good Golly, Batali!

Celebrity TV chef brings his mix of Italy, New World to his latest eatery

By **DANIEL YOUNG**

Daily News Restaurant Critic

★★★

BABBO: 110 Waverly Place, between Sixth Ave. & Macdougal St.; (212) 777-0303. Reservations required. Major credit. Appetizers, \$7-\$11; pastas, \$15-\$19; entrées, \$17-\$25. Open for dinner Tues.-Sun. Handicap access: street-level entrance & restrooms. Coffee rating: balanced espresso.

NO ITALIAN-ENGLISH dictionary or road atlas will help you define or pinpoint the cooking of Mario Batali. But understanding the appeal of Batalian food, with its Italian regional influences and New World inventions, is simple: its founding father crowds his plates with crisp flavors and properly cooked, hot-temperated food.

Babbo, which is Italian for daddy, is the two-papa partnership of restaurateur Joe Bastianich (Becco, Frico Bar) and Batali, whose vivacity and natural charisma as a TV Food Network personality has made his first eatery, Po, one of the hottest meal tickets in Manhattan.

Still, Batali fans may be a little disappointed with Babbo for the same reason I admire it: the place is not at all flashy. It is quartered in the one-time coach house previously occupied by The Coach House. On the lower level, beyond the bar and its rich wooded library of liquid diversions, is a softly lit room that, like the menu, is not sure if it wants to be dressy and upscale or casual and rustic. From leather banquettes, couples sitting side-by-side face out toward a beautiful round service table displaying fruit, cheeses, wines, olive oils and a floral arrangement. (The tables upstairs won't be used for another month.)

Appetizers quickly establish Batali as the daddy of 100 vinaigrettes. He accents that mother sauce with saffron



JON NASO

PLATEFULS OF FUN: Diners dig into some of the many delectable Italian appetizers and entrées at Babbo, a partnership of restaurateur Joe Bastianich and TV Food Network chef Mario Batali.

for silky smoked sable garnished with citrus fruits and steamed leeks; with thyme for thinly sliced testa (head cheese) coated with a mustard seed crunch; with black olive pesto and blood orange zest for a salad of boutique summer lettuces; with “bagna cauda” (hot bath), the Piedmontese peasant sauce of anchovy, garlic, butter and extra virgin oil, for marinated fresh anchovies and mizuma greens.

Light touches

But these notes are never used to drown — or drown out — a dish. It's the tricolored beets and not the rhubarb dressing you notice most on the sopresata starter. And portobellos, though marinated in red wine vinegar before joining grilled polenta topping with two cheeses, arrive crisp and dry on the outside. Outstanding!

I could advise ordering one of the pastas in lieu of a main course, but never the reverse. They're that good. Mint love letters, not previously found in any catalogue of pasta shapes, are elongated, ravioli-like parcels of mint purée accompanied by a merguez (spicy lamb

sausage)-ragout. Tagliatelle is tossed with fresh tomatoes, a pound of fresh lobster and sweet and spicy corn that's toasted for a gritty, popcorn crunch. And chopped beef cheek ravioli with a squab liver purée and thinly sliced truffles is a heady star turn.

The nimble kitchen revels in excesses with its tepee of grilled lamb chops over broccoli rabe as it preserves the elegant subtlety of whole roasted pompano with an unnecessary lemon jam condiment. (The wait staff, too, is agile, but not yet the wine service, with its top-heavy selection.) Between extremes might be the awesome special of juicy pork loin stacked with three types of sweet onions. Only sautéed skate is overproduced.

Pastry chef Gina de Palma does a splendid pistachio semifreddo with chocolate sauce, a tangy lemon ricotta cheesecake with blackberries, a fabulous selection of cookies and biscotti, and a nice seasonal sorbetti tasting presented in six mini-glasses. These pleasures require no dictionary.

Reviews are available online at (<http://www.mostnewyork.com>)

THE EATS BEAT

By **IRENE SAX**

I'M LOOKING FOR THE cheapest real lunch in town — no slices, no hot dogs — and I may have found it at Curry Leaves. For \$3.50, I had soup, curried chicken, pork with yams, chili-sparked green beans and two grapefruit-sized scoops of rice at this two-month-old Malaysian restaurant.

Malaysian food is the ultimate fusion cuisine, a seamless blend of native Malay, Indian and Chinese flavors. When I went back at night with friends, we started the meal with *rajak* (\$4.50), chunks of jicama, green mango and cucumber bathed in sweet soy sauce mixed with *belachan*, fermented fish paste. This Malay seasoning is like anchovies: wonderful when used with subtlety and unpleasant (at least to Western palates) when it's not. It was easier to love *achar* (\$2.95), hot-and-sweet pickled vegetables.

Fish-head curry (\$13.95) provided the Indian taste. With chopsticks, we picked out string beans, okra, eggplant, tomatoes and bits of fish to eat with coconut rice, then drank the golden coconut broth. For the Chinese flavors, we had smoky wok-seared noodles tossed with bean sprouts, eggs, shrimp and crunchy pork rind (\$4.75). In China, the sauce would have been soy; here, a suggestion of *belachan* blended the other flavors. Chili chicken (\$14.95) was a whole bird, head and all, sitting on a sauce that tasted like a mixture of sweet ketchup and hot oil. Deliciously overcooked under its crunchy skin, it was pure comfort food.

For dessert we had *chendal* (\$1.80), shaved ice hiding sweet red beans, chewy agar jujubes and bean-flour noodles. A sauce of brown sugar beaten into coconut milk made it look like an ice-cream sundae, and it was both weird and wonderful.

B **CURRY LEAVES MALAYSIAN CUISINE:** 135-31 40th Rd., Flushing; (718) 762-9313. Open daily, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Cash only.

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