

The Dallas Morning News
Wednesday, June 11, 2003

READER SWAP

Sweet 'n'
saucy

While it bakes, this chocolate cake makes its own thick, rich sauce. 2G



Photography by JUAN GARCIA/Staff Photographer

Chef Mario Batali (center) cracks up the crew during shooting at the Mozzarella Co. With him are (from front left) Emily Benson, segment producer; Ian Vollmer, sound mixer; Richard Dallett, cameraman; and Paula Lambert, owner of the Mozzarella Co.

Say cheese!

Food Network camera rolls as Mario Batali tries his hand at making the Mozzarella Co.'s specialty

By KIM PIERCE
Special Contributor

Celebrity Italian chef Mario Batali may swagger down the streets of New York with the confidence of a rock star. But hunched over a bowl of fresh mozzarella in Dallas, he's sweating like a rookie crooner on *American Idol*.

It's the first time he's ever tried to squeeze the slippery stuff into little balls. Paula Lambert patiently walks him through the technique. Grab-pull-squeeze-toss. Her orbs come off with laser precision; the owner of the Mozzarella Co. has made thousands, and it shows. With fierce concentration, Mario struggles to match her moves. He's Pavarotti doing a pirouette.

Mario Batali has reason to sweat. The humidity hovers near 90 percent in the tight, choking Deep Ellum space, and the Food Network camera is rolling. Part of a new series set to air in the fall, an episode on cheese making has brought Mario and a four-member crew to Dallas. The series is also why the *Molto Mario* star, author and chef-owner of New York's acclaimed Babbo will be in nine other cities across the United States for a shooting schedule that began in March and ends in August.

The series, yet to be named, celebrates the American, as well as the Italian, in Italian-American cuisine. It brings Mario — the chef has achieved one-name status — face-to-face with people who have found unique ways to celebrate their culinary heritage, whether it's making cheese the Old World way or putting an Italian imprint on U.S. neighborhoods.

"We're out here finding Italian-American culture but also American culture," Mario says later in the cool cab of an SUV. "Everyone I'm meeting on the road is excitingly Americanized. But you can be beautifully American without having to compromise your real roots."

In this show, he's the student instead of the teacher. But, like Mario himself, it's more complicated than that. As host, he's also the bridge between those experienced in the ways of TV shooting and those not — so who's really the student and who's the teacher seesaws back and forth.

Not only that, the crew is racing against time. Their schedule is tight, and Mario is the one who cuts the tension for an overwhelmed guest — a guest who's as vulnerable doing "grabs" and "places" as Mario is on the steamy cheese factory floor. But in these whirlwind shoots, everyone has to be a quick study.

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Shooting on cheese time

For the episode tentatively titled "Cheese All the Way," Food Network director of programming Irene Wong has chosen Paula Lambert and the Mozzarella Co. in Dallas. In 1982, Paula founded the artisanal business using the same exacting methods for handcrafting fresh mozzarella that she witnessed while living in Italy. Today, she is one of America's most famous cheese makers.

But as tight as the Dallas schedule is — the crew has two days to shoot with Mario and work in a segment at Arcodoro/Pomodoro for another episode — it is apparent that shooting proceeds on cheese time.

"This is the mother of all cheeses," says Mario, camera rolling, as he and Paula transfer what look like oversized sponge slabs from a white plastic tub onto a stainless steel table. They're working in one corner of the factory, a space not more than 20 by 35 feet, where the cement floor is always wet from the water used while making cheese and scrubbing work surfaces.

The TV crew's mammoth light reflector takes up another entire corner. Sound man Ian Vollmer's microphone is thrust inches from their faces, just out of the camera's range. A half-dozen cheese workers huddle at the opposite end of the room, waiting. They have cheese to make.



Mario cuts the *hoja santa* leaves that he will wrap around this mozzarella cheese during shooting at the Mozzarella Co.



Irene Wong, Food Network director of programming, reads the script to Mario as he playfully teases her while filming at the Mozzarella Co.



Ms. Wong uses a digital camera to photograph the Ricotta Pancakes With Banana-Pecan Syrup. The digital camera is used for placement of items on the set during shooting, and the photo of the pancakes, along with the recipe, will go on the Food Network Web site.

Experts become students in course of shooting TV show

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Everyone wears rubber boots except Mario, who's managed so far — amazingly — to not get his Converse high-tops wet. They're nearly the same shade as his can-not-colored hair, which is tucked under a cap and pulled back in a ponytail. Paula's rainbow-striped boots almost upstage his signature footwear.

"Now there's a special way to cut the curds," Paula says, taking a knife and shaving the curds into thin, diagonal slices. The blue-eyed, Southern firecracker looks over to check Mario's progress. "Thinner, thinner," she urges. Thinner, indeed, for this batch of mozzarella turns out to be a temperamental mistress.

The sliced curds go into a vat with 180-degree water to be slowly turned until they "string" into cheese. What began as a sponge is transformed into something like glistening, stretchy bread dough.

But something is wrong. This mozzarella is not "stringing" properly. It's clinging in a clump to the stainless steel paddle like a bee-hive. Despite Paula and Mario's best efforts, the cheese stubbornly refuses to cooperate.

The camera and lights click off, and Paula says, "I need Carmen." After a short conference in Spanish with cheese maker Carmen Lopez, Paula turns back to Mario and the crew and says, "She thinks we didn't cut the pieces up small enough. I am so sorry about this."

The window for stringing this mozzarella has closed. It will be made into more forgiving scamorza (pecan-smoked mozzarella) instead. All day, the schedule has shifted to accommodate the timing of various phases of cheese making. Now there is nothing to do but start a new batch of mozzarella in the middle of the night and try the shot again in the morning — the morning of a day when Mario and Paula are going to make three dishes at Paula's home. It's going to be tight.

Arcodoro's moment in the lights

In a well-planned Dallas "two-fer," New York chef Mario Batali and company shoot a segment for another episode of his new Food Network series with Elisio and Francesco Ferris. The Sardinian brothers own and operate Arcodoro/Pomodoro, where even the stone for the tiled floor comes from the Italian island of Sardinia.

The first shot is sandwiched between Arcodoro/Pomodoro's pizza oven and a stove — Francesco shows Mario how to prepare *shufto*, a traditional dish of lamb and vegetables.

But when Food Network director of programming Irene Wong, who's producing the series, calls for a re-shoot, Francesco looks like venison in the headlights.

"If they're not used to TV, the whole process is new," says cameraman Richard Dallett. "The little details like not being able to acknowledge the other people in the room." In making TV, the on-camera personalities usually and talk only to one another. And the same re-shoot that stumped Dallas cheese maker Paula Lambert now catches Francesco off guard.

Mario puts these guests at ease by breaking into familiar, comforting Italian repartee.

As Elisio goes through the same paces — making *pane frattau* from lamb broth, tomato sauce, eggs, pecorino sardo and *pane carasau*, Sardinia's famous "music" bread — Mario asks him: Why did they move to Texas, of all places?

"Maybe Texas reminds us a little bit of Sardinia," says Elisio. "It's got its own government. People here are very agreeable. But they have minds of their own — very much like Sardinians."

For the final shot, the two Sardinians and the big Italian chef cozy up to a table in the wine cellar — along with the cameraman, the sound man and Ms. Wong. They squeeze into a space the size of a bathroom. Like so many Sardinians. But it sure beats shooting in a sauna with a blob of cheese calling the shots.

K.P.



Photos by JUAN GARCIA/Staff Photographer

Between takes, Mario Batali steps outside the Mozzarella Co. to make a phone call.

'Grabs' and 'places'

Once off the factory floor, the crew shifts to prepare the tiny store — no bigger than a study — for the final shot of the day. As the crew sets up, Ms. Wong takes a call on her cellphone. Mario leans a big-eyed, into her face and says, "I'm his-eeeee," with mock exasperation. There's a twinkle in his eye. He may not have sliced the curds thin enough, but he knows how to cut the tension.

Lights on. Machines off (fans and freezers). Action.

The camera's rolling again as Paula slices a ball of finished mozzarella and gives Mario a taste. "It's soft, quite tangy," Mario says. "What it does remind me of is the area around the Amalfi coast, where they make a perfect caprese."

Paula slices a ripe Texas tomato. "This is the classic tomato-and-mozzarella salad I'm making," she says. She begins laying the mozzarella and tomato slices around a platter as Mario tears off basil leaves and tucks them in between. He sprinkles on a little sea salt, she commends the pepper mill, and Mario finishes with an elaborate flourish, pouring the olive oil.

Together, they take bites of the salad on a fork, react and — the shot's done.

Not quite. Ms. Wong calls for a "re-shoot." Now Paula's the one off-balance, feeling like an amateur among the pros. She's not quite sure what's happening. Segment producer Emily Benson and Ms. Wong begin resetting the counter as it was before the shot started. They work from digital images snapped by Ms. Benson so everything will be just right. More basil. Get another tomato. More mozzarella. Wipe the platter clean. Set the salt, pepper and olive oil just so. Oh, and refill the olive oil.

In the re-shoot, the camera captures each gesture individually — from picking up the knife to pouring the oil. It's like watching people move in a strobe light. There are "tomato grabs" — Paula picks up a tomato, pulls it away. Stops. Mario's "grab-and-pluck" — he grabs the basil and plucks off one leaf. Stops. It takes awhile for Paula to get the hang of the stop-and-go action.

Re-shoots are what you do, the crew explains, when you have only one camera. It gives the producers and editors back at the network more to work with. They must render a 22-minute-10-second episode from the 20 to 25 half-hour cassettes the crew will shoot. And Ms. Wong won't be around to help

them. But she has edited the pilot, from which the post-production staff will take its cue.

The crew is cooked. They arrived long before Mario to shoot "B-roll" — atmospheric footage in and around the Mozzarella Co. that will be woven into the episode. Paula needs to go home and test recipes for a magazine article. But Mario? Mario's ready to sample some Texas nightlife.

And sample he does — first with barbecue at Sonny Bryan's and later with dinner at Abacus. But Deep Ellum is dead this night, so his hankering for live music will remain an itch he can't scratch.

The unkindest cut

Day two of shooting begins on an ominous note. Paula has spent the night before not just testing recipes, but waiting three hours in the emergency room. During one of those recipe run-throughs, she has sliced her left index finger with a handheld blender. But she refuses stitches, knowing that you cannot get them wet — and she will not compromise the shoot. So the doctors use surgical glue to mend the torn flesh.

Still, Paula must keep the injured finger as dry as possible. Most viewers will never notice that she is wearing a finger cot through part of the episode. Only after all the shooting's done will she graduate to a butterfly bandage.

This morning, the mozzarella making comes off without a hitch — except for the saunlike conditions on the factory floor. Sweat is literally rolling off Richard Dallett, whose 25-pound camera seems to put on weight with each passing moment. Although he's shot nearly every *Survivor* episode to date, this heat is as wilting as any he's faced.

The source of the moist heat — a 200-gallon pasteurizer — has been turned off just long enough for the crew to complete the shot. They have 15 minutes. After that, the goat's milk inside will be imperiled. Once again, they are on cheese time.

With intensely focused grab-pull-squeeze-tosses, the deadline is met. The pasteurizer switches back on. And the crew packs up and caravans to Paula's home for the rest of the day.

Once there, they immediately launch into making over her kitchen — pulling honey condiments out of her pantry to build a countertop backdrop, festive plates out of her cupboard for more of the same, filling 5-gallon jars with flour and sugar, and titling her work table at an angle across the

room — all to create a warmer, cozier feel. A local chef, who's been prepping food since 7:30 a.m., works around them.

The team presses through the first recipe, Ricotta Pancakes With Banana-Pecan Syrup, from Paula's cookbook, *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide* (Simon & Schuster, \$35). It requires measuring dry ingredients, separating eggs, beating egg whites, cooking the batter on a stovetop griddle, making syrup in a skillet and plating the whole thing.

This time, Paula's alert for the stop-action re-shoot of each step. "Yesterday, I didn't know what she meant," Paula says. Today, she's a hawk, eyeing every gesture.

She pays attention to how she scoops the flour, how she taps the sifter, where the spatula is when she starts and how the butter melts on the griddle. It's beginning to be a dance for her and Mario.

Fast, faster, fastest

After a late lunch, the team drills through the remaining recipes, hitting crunch time about 4:30.

As Ms. Wong and Ms. Wong set up the final sequence, Mario bellows from the living room that they need to wrap it up. They're approaching the 10-hour limit after which the rules of engagement change for the crew. Besides, everyone is getting tired. Except Mario. He's just bored.

As the clock ticks louder, the room is briefly tense with a misunderstanding about the Prowlone and Salami-Stuffed Bread. There's supposed to be one already filled, risen, ready to bake. But Paula insists it could not have been done ahead — unless someone had done it during lunch. Ms. Wong says they won't be able to shoot it, then, unless they can figure out a way to speed one up. So figure they do. Paula grabs the dough and starts slinging the ingredients into a loaf. She hustles it into the warm oven, where, miraculously, it rises to the occasion. Just like Paula. Just like the whole team.

For the stuffed-bread sequence, though, re-shoots are few. The brisk pace quickens to a sprint. By now, everyone has the groove.

When cameraman Dallett calls for a grab, Paula grabs and stops like a pro. She and Mario work "air" dough instead of real dough out of the camera's eye as Mr. Dallett records their bantering. "Now you both pretend you're folding it over," says Ms. Wong. They pretend. They fold.

And everyone in the room snaps still, almost holding their breath, when sound man Yollner asks for quiet. Absurd as it sounds, he must record 30 seconds of ambient silence for each sequence. The better to realistically cut and slice back in post-production.

Finally, minutes before the crew will turn back into pumpkins and mice, Ms. Wong says the words they've been acting to hear: "It's a wrap! Thank you, everybody!"

How do you say 'respect' in Italian?

With four A-list restaurants — Babbo, Lupa, Esca and Otto Enoteca Pizzeria — he may be the most well-known Italian chef in New York. With two television shows — *Molto Mario* and *Mario Eats Italy* — he may be the most visible Italian chef in New York. That still doesn't mean people know Mario Batali's name. "People think his first name is 'Moto,'" says Irene Wong, director of programming at the Food Network. But "molto" means "more." Hence, the show brings you more of Mario. But that's not the only indignity Mr. Batali suffers at the hands of a TV show title. In Italy, his Dallas film crew says, the title of his second show gets shortened in TV logs to "Mario Eats It."

K.P.



Ricotta Pancakes With Banana-Pecan Syrup

Pictured

- Banana-pecan syrup (recipe follows)
- 2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 large eggs, separated
- 2 cups milk
- 4 ounces fresh ricotta, well drained
- Butter or oil

Make banana-pecan syrup; set aside but keep warm. Preheat a griddle or skillet over medium heat to hot; warm a serving platter to 200 F.

Sift the dry ingredients together onto wax paper or a plate; set aside.

Beat the egg whites in a medium bowl with an electric mixer or whisk until stiff but not dry; set aside.

Beat the egg yolks, milk and ricotta together until well-blended and smooth. Add the dry ingredients and mix gently with a large spoon. Stir a spoonful of the egg whites into the batter to lighten it, then fold in the remaining whites with a rubber spatula.

Grease the griddle or skillet with butter or oil. Pour ¼ to ½ cup batter per pancake onto the griddle and cook for about 2 minutes, or until bubbles form on the surface, then flip the pancakes over. Cook on the other side 2 more minutes, or until golden brown. Transfer to warm plate until ready to serve. Serve on heated plates topped with banana-pecan syrup. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Banana-pecan syrup: Melt 2 tablespoons unsalted butter in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add ½ cup chopped pecans and sauté for 1 minute, or until fragrant. Add 2 small bananas, thinly sliced (¾ cup) and cook, stirring, for about 2 minutes. Add 1 cup cane or maple syrup; cook for 1 to 2 minutes, until it surges hot and slightly thickened. Remove from heat and keep warm till ready to serve.

PER SERVING: Cal 557 (32% fat) Fat 20 g (8 g sat) Fiber 3 g Chol 107 mg Sodium 535 mg Carb 33 g Calcium 277 mg

SOURCE: *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide*



Paula Lambert's colorful boots outshine Mr. Batali's high-tops.

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