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TV chef extraordinaire Mario Batali serves some of America's most creative Italian food at his restaurants, Pó and Babbo, in Manhattan. Here are questions he fielded during a recent chat on F&W's Web site:

### MARIO ON FOOD

#### Why did you start cooking?

**MB:** My family always cooked. I didn't know what it was not to cook. I remember going to a friend's house when I was eight years old, seeing packaged sausage and asking why they bought it.

#### What's your favorite region in Italy?

**MB:** Every region has its own attractions and its own greatness. That said, Amalfi!

#### What olives do you use for pasta?

**MB:** If I'm making a dish from Liguria, I use Taggia olives from that region. If I'm doing a dish from Naples, I like to use Gaeta olives from the Naples area. The same rule goes for olive oils. When I'm cooking a regional dish, I choose a regional oil.

#### Why is Parmigiano-Reggiano so ridiculously expensive?

**MB:** It takes nine gallons of milk to produce one pound of cheese, and it's

made by artisans, not factory workers. Its consistency is controlled by a consortium of Parmigiano-Reggiano producers. In fact, if you go to a bank in Parma, you'll see only one guard outside, but at the cheese warehouse you'll see eight guards.

#### How do you cook polenta?

**MB:** Some people use milk, but polenta is a poverty-based dish and it should be made with water. In an ideal world, you'd use a copper pan over an open fire, and you'd stir slowly and constantly. Make instant polenta if you have to, but it won't be as tasty. Don't add butter: butter in polenta is a sign of an unevolved palate.

#### I'd love some ideas for bruschetta.

**MB:** Any seasonal vegetable blanched and dressed with extra-virgin olive oil, lemon juice and pepper makes perfect bruschetta when it's used to top thin slices of toasted bread. Fall's a good time for wild mushrooms or small cubes of zucchini, pumpkin or any other squash.

#### Do you have any favorite ways to roast potatoes at home?

**MB:** When I have starchy potatoes, like Idahos, I cut them into cubes, rinse them, dry them and put them in a pan with olive oil, garlic cloves and rosemary. When I have waxy potatoes, like Yukon Golds, I keep them whole (if they're little) and toss them with olive oil, garlic, rosemary and pepper. For a good crust, I cook them on the stove for 10 minutes first, shaking them so they don't stick. Then I roast them at 450 degrees for a half-hour. I also roast potatoes with duck fat the same way.

#### I love fresh herbs but don't know which ones are best for fish.

**MB:** It depends on the kind of fish. A really rich, oily variety like salmon or tuna can handle the strong flavors of sage or rosemary, but more delicate fish like sole and halibut might really work only with tarragon or oregano.

#### Do you have a great shrimp recipe?

**MB:** I have a thousand. My favorite shrimp dish at this moment uses cloves of garlic, habanero chiles and Limoncello, a sweet lemon liqueur from Amalfi.

#### What's your favorite dessert?

**MB:** My all-time favorite is vanilla ice cream with blackberries. At Babbo we serve great saffron *panna cotta*. And Isaac Mizrahi says that just knowing our pistachio *semifreddo* exists on the planet is torture. I love that guy. I want to meet his mom.

### MARIO ON WINE

#### What type of Italian wine goes best with seafood scampi?

**MB:** Fiano di Avellino, a white wine from Campania, works well with scampi and other seafood recipes from that region because the best wines for pairing come from the region of the dish's provenance. These matches are intuitive.

#### Can I drink red wine cold?

**MB:** Yes. If I go to a restaurant where the wine is not served at cellar temperature—between 50 and 60 degrees—I have it put on ice for 10 minutes. Red wine was not meant to be drunk at room temperature.

#### Can you recommend a Chianti?

**MB:** The 1995 Castello di Ama Classico and Riserva are both under \$15. They're widely available, and they're excellent.

### MARIO ON RESTAURANT MADNESS

#### Do Pó and Babbo take reservations? I hear it's impossible to get a table.

**MB:** Pó and Babbo accept reservations one month in advance. The reservations line at Pó opens at noon, the one at Babbo at 10 A.M. Keep in mind that restaurants have cancellations and no-shows every night, so if you're patient and friendly, odds are you can get a table, albeit with a wait.

#### Would you ever open a restaurant in London? It's a hot restaurant city.

**MB:** I'd never open a restaurant more than 20 blocks from my house. A restaurant is about the right food and atmosphere done the right way every day, and I can't do that from across the ocean. I can't even do that from across town.

*Stay tuned: F&W chats take place every Tuesday afternoon at 4:00. For upcoming topics, check out [www.foodandwine.com](http://www.foodandwine.com) or [www.chat.yahoo.com](http://www.chat.yahoo.com).*



Co-owners Mario Batali, LEFT, and Joe Bastianich in front of New York's Babbo.