

Mario Batali

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But it also was rigorously Italian."

Citing Batali's inclusion of offerings such as offal, Mariani says Babbo brought "heavy" Italian food to New York City when many Italian restaurants had been stressing light preparations.

Selections at Babbo include the grilled stuffed pancetta with sweet corn fregolata and green tomato mostarda, a pork tenderloin dish with braised baby leeks, artichokes and Cinzano vinaigrette and calf's brain with lemon and sage.

"As a chef, he's really kind of turned the Italian dining experience on its ear," Bastianich says. "He kind of shook things up a little bit. By a thorough understanding of what is really Italian and by a thorough understanding of what Americans want, he's been able to interpret Italian dining and Italian food in a way that is very approachable for the American dining public on simple and more sophisticated levels."

Batali's take on Italian food resulted in the Best New Restaurant Award from the James Beard Foundation for Babbo in 1999.

In modest terms Batali explains that his preparation techniques and menu conceits adhere loyally to Italian cooking methods.

"We make simple food derived from our local ingredients and treat them as an Italian cook would: simply and with an emphasis on flavor truth, not flavor masking," Batali says. "We have not reinvented a wheel here; this is the reason food tastes so good in a simple trattoria in Italy."

Most recently, after being inspired by research of Sicilian dishes, Batali devised a bruschetta al'inferno at Babbo as a January special. The item features mussels served cold in a spicy sauce on toasted bread.

Under Batali's approach no item is generated from a planned-out blueprint.

"We do not sit down to develop a dish; the dishes happen organically and truly without a formulaic approach," Batali says.

Both Bastianich and Batali say their restaurants

At a glance...

Title: chef-partner

Company: Babbo, Esca, Lupa and Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, New York

Birth date: Sept. 19, 1960

Hometown: Seattle

Personal: married, two children

Education: bachelor of arts in economics and Spanish theater, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J.

Food he would take to a desert island: Parmigiano-Reggiano, good bread, extra-virgin olive oil, tomatoes and Friulian white wine

spring from one guideline: "We do things that inspire us," Bastianich says. "I don't think there's any kind of planned-out conquest strategy. That's not the way we think."

Following the success of Babbo, Batali and Bastianich in 1999 opened Lupa, which was modeled on the idea of a Roman trattoria.

In 2000 Batali and Bastianich opened Esca, which delved "into the question: 'How are people really eating fish in Italy, and how do we translate that into midtown Manhattan?'" Bastianich says.

Until Esca, "no Italian restaurateur had the gall" to attempt a menu that centered on fish and crudo, or raw-fish dishes, Mariani says.

Bastianich and Batali also opened a retail store, Italian Wine Merchants, in New York City in 1999.

Building on those achievements, the James Beard Foundation named Batali the best chef in New York City in 2002.

Also in that year Babbo, Lupa and Esca all posted sales increases in the range of high single to double digits, compared with the figures for 2001. And all three restaurants also notched a boost in profitability.

"It was a great year for us," Bastianich says. Bastianich also co-owns Becco, Felidia Ristorante and Lidia's Kansas City with his mother, Lidia Bastianich.

In explaining the driving forces behind the sales and profit rises, Bastianich says that the restaurants are "smartly priced and offer a lot of value."

"We're fortunate to work in the realm of Italian food because people don't consider it to be conspicuous consumption even if it

is more high-end dining. And there's familiarity of the Italian restaurant experience that people can relate to in more troubled times. So I think we're fortunate to have Italian restaurants and, hopefully, the last meal people will eliminate off their calendars due to budgeting will be the Italian dinner."

Bastianich says the newest restaurant, Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, was pegged to open at a price range reflective of the "times that are happening."

"There are trends in dining, and you want to be a trendsetter," Bastianich adds. "But there are also times when the market may be receptive to a higher price point or a lower price point. And I think that in these times people are looking to spend a little bit less and get a little bit more value. We're just responding to that with Otto."

The restaurant's check average, which Bastianich projected at about \$28, including wine, will be closer to Lupa than Babbo, which has a dinner-check average of \$70.

Otto's menu features about 15 to 20 different pizzas, including one with olive oil and rock salt and another featuring porcini mushrooms and prosciutto. The menu also will feature a number of antipasti offerings, including marinated vegetables, house-cured meats and marinated seafood.

Otto's wine list, which will feature only Italian wines, will consist of 500 to 600 selections, with a price range of \$16 to \$225 a bottle.

As Batali takes on an increasing number of ventures, some observers state concern that he may risk spreading himself too thin.

"There's no question with all that he's done that his energies have been dissipated," Mariani says.

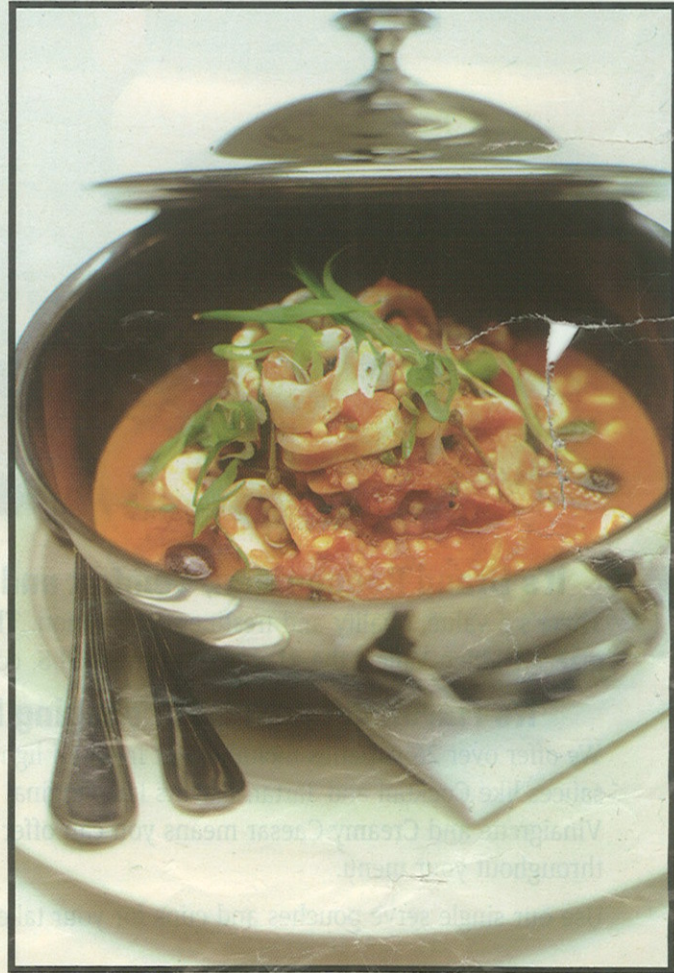
However, Mariani says, he hasn't seen a falloff in the food quality at Batali's restaurants.

That appears to be aided in part by the fact that Batali "seems to have very good people both in the kitchen and in management," Mariani says.

In addition, Mariani adds, "The thing that may save him is his convictions about Italian food, which won't allow him to compromise too much."



Left: Batali's dry-rubbed rib-eye steak for two



Right: Two-minute calamari "Sicilian life-guard style," a name Batali coined himself.

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