

A Taste of the Good Life, Served With Gusto

By JOYCE WADLER

IT can be a delicate matter, asking a businessman about the ups and downs of his professional life, but one thing you don't have to worry about with the chef Mario Batali — unless we are talking about the proper way to approach and assess his homemade salami — is delicacy.

Whaddaya wanna know?

Why Mr. Batali, the Food Network star with the trademark red ponytail and shorts, broke up with his partner at Po, his first restaurant? — oops, there's been an 11th-hour chat with his lawyer, he needs to eat his words on that one. Whether he got the money to open Babbo, his three-star restaurant in Greenwich Village, from his wife, whose family owns Coach Farm? (Nope, it was a book advance.) His extracurricular life at Rutgers University? A hundred and fifty Grateful Dead concerts. More?

Here is Mr. Batali, who kind of reminds you of the actor John Goodman, or maybe the only guy you wouldn't mind sitting next to at an airport bar on a long layover, talking about the four months he worked for Marco Pierre White. "The most important chef in London," he calls him. A man of "unbounded imagination."

So why did he work for him for only four months? "He threw things at you," Mr. Batali, 40, says in a quiet moment at Babbo. "A whole pan of hot risotto right at your chest. He's famous for being incorrigible."

(Two phone messages, left for Mr. White in London, brought no reply.)

That scar on Mr. Batali's forehead? Is this a souvenir from his days with Mr. White?

"No," he says, laughing. "That's my near-death experience from last year. Brain aneurysm. I was out with my wife, and I heard this whooshing sound, and my vision was a little funny — the kind of thing I remember from my recreational drug use in college. They fixed it, but aneurysms are dangerous things — you can die from them. My wife always uses this to remind me that life is an incredible gift. Like someone could appreciate it better than I could."

Times are good for Mr. Batali. In addition to Babbo, which won the Best New Restaurant of the Year award from the James Beard Foundation in 1998, there are two other restaurants, cookbooks, a wine store and his "Molto Mario" television show. In January, there will be a new show, "Mario Eats Italy."

His philosophy, as told to Nation's Restaurant News: "Italian cooking is not putting together a symphony of nine very strange ingredients, but two or three separate things and



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Mario Batali, outside Babbo, one of his three restaurants in Manhattan.

allowing them to sing."

He always loved good food. Growing up in Seattle, third-generation Italian, his father an engineer for Boeing, his mother a nurse, everybody cooked. The first career goal of Mr. Batali, who stands 5-foot-11 and weighs 240 pounds, was pro football — until he realized how big the pros were. He was never one to hit his head against obstacles greater than himself, he notes. Instead, he studied Spanish theater and economics at Rutgers, in New Brunswick, N.J., then cooked in California hotels.

BUT his real training was in Italy in the mountain town of Borgo Capanne, at a family-run trattoria, La Volta. He stayed three years, mostly working for nothing. What great memories: everything was made to order there, he says; O.K., maybe not the ravioli, but you didn't cut an onion before the service started. Mr. Batali returns to the United States, gets a job at a Village restaurant called Rocco, and lives the single chef life: you get out at 11:30 p.m., he says, it still gives you five hours to hang out.

Then one day into Rocco walks a saleswoman for Coach Farm goat cheese, Susi Cahn. Mr. Batali doesn't like her: she is too aggressive, too pushy — in other words, a good saleswoman. She is also beautiful, which Mr. Batali notices when she comes back to Rocco for dinner one night. His parents also happen to be there, and when dinner is over somebody brings out an accordion and his father plays and they drink Averna and everybody sings. Today there are

two sons, Benno, 4, and Leo, 2½, and Mr. Batali sends his wife flowers on the ninth day of every month, because the ninth day of November, in 1994, is when they married.

But let us now accompany Mr. Batali through his empire: Esca, on 43rd and Ninth, where the chef David Pasternack cuts cubes of raw salmon, adds balsamic vinegar and a pinch of sea salt for the visitors, and teases Mr. Batali about getting home at 3:30 a.m. from the R.E.M. Christmas party; to Lupa, on Thompson Street, to taste a sea bass and potato ravioli filling; then to what is clearly Mr. Batali's deepest new love, his salami kitchen, behind his new wine store, Italian Wine Merchants, on East 16th Street.

"If you're a vegan, this is what hell smells like," he says happily, opening the door to a cooler where hams are hanging, then inhaling deeply. "So little time, so many cool things."

He takes out a lardo coppa, a salted pork butt and tries to cut it with his new toy, a \$5,000 slicer you use by hand — otherwise, Mr. Batali says, the heat from an electric slicer might melt some of the "beautiful fat." There's only one problem: the chef can't make it work. Out comes an assistant; the salami is sliced into thin curls and offered around.

"There's a way to eat salami," Mr. Batali says, as a wine lover might discuss wine. "First you rest it on your fingers to warm it up a little. Then you smell it. Then you put it on your tongue and let it sit there for a second, then —" a happy gulp.

And — you may not believe this — the salami sings.