

THE SULTAN OF SLICE

CHEF MARIO BATALI HAS BEEN BLOWING THE MINDS OF NEW YORK FOODIES FOR THE PAST 10 YEARS. TO ME, HE'S QUITE simply the best. Oh, and did I mention he's also fun? I've spotted him on more than one occasion running to work in the snow through Washington Square Park wearing his signature shorts while carrying a plastic shopping bag filled with gnocchi. He lives and works in the nabe. His crowning jewel, Babbo (where he prepared the best dinner I've ever eaten), is on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village, and his casual, Roman-style Lupa (my best lunch ever) is a few blocks away on Thompson Street. And now he's given Village people yet another culinary wet dream—a new downtown classic called Otto Enoteca Pizzeria.

Although Batali and his longtime partner Joe Bastianich (along with Lupa's Jason Denton and Mark Ladner) tried to open their brilliant new pizza palace and antipasto bar quietly last month, the boîte is already jammed with locals (expect a wait; best bet is a weekday lunch) and Batali fanatics who have come from far and wide to taste the goods. "It's a pretty simple concept," Batali explains. "We just serve pizza, antipasto and gelato, although we're serving mortadella paninis in the mornings at the bar with cappuccinos and fresh blood-orange juice." Otto may be a simple concept, but deciding what to order is not. When you begin eating your way through this menu, start with the porcini pizza and artichokes, and top it off with the divine Meyer-lemon gelato. Otto has already become famous for its gelato, and Batali confided his secret to me. "We have this amazing, dedicated gelato guru named Meredith Kurtzman, who traveled all over studying gelato-making for us," he says. "Sometimes I think it would be great to do a takeout slice-and-gelato stand with a window. Maybe next door at that Korean nail salon. . . ." *Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, 1 Fifth Ave., New York. (212) 995-9559. No reservations accepted.*

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