

“What do you feel like eating?” It’s the question Mario Batali poses to undecided guests at his restaurants or to friends and family at home. While the restaurant menu might include offbeat specialties like tripe or cardoons (a vegetable available from November to March), Batali says any dining experience is centered on the basic question, “What do you feel like eating?”

Batali, perhaps best known for Food Network shows *Man vs. Wild* and *Mario Eats Italy*, helps answer that question with more than 150 recipes in *The Babbo Cookbook* (Clarkson Potter, 2002). Selected from the menu at Babbo Ristorante and Enoteca, the New York City restaurant he co-owns, the recipes aren’t “dumbed down” for the home cook, Batali says. “They’re what we really serve.” In the book, he adds, “If I had to distill the essence of Babbo it would probably come down to one concept: Italian hospitality, but with a decided American twist. Like Italian cooks, we use locally grown

products with a near fanaticism to express the flavor of our dirt, our wine, our rain. We try to handcraft as many of our components, from salami to preserves, in our own kitchen. Recognizing that the element of the homemade in your jam, pickles, tomato sauce, wine, antipasto, or whatever is as important as the recipe is what will make your cooking as good as, if not better than, the cooking at Babbo.”

To that end, Batali stresses that “your cooking can only be as good as the ingredients you buy.” That doesn’t mean you have to invest in high-priced delicacies every night. It means you shop for quality, not convenience, and get the best buy for your money. After that, it’s your own personal stamp that sets the mood, he adds, from the bread you serve to the glassware that holds the wine.

Batali instructs home cooks to “shop hard and shop smart. Italians walk into every store with the intention of taking home the



MARIO'S

BY TAMMY MINN

very best stuff in the store. They think of this as their God-given right and responsibility – not just an option when they feel like splurging. This does not mean buying veal chops every time you hit the butcher shop. It means talking with the butcher, finding out what is really special this week, discussing the options, and taking home the prize. It is not every day that veal breast or lamb shoulder are available, but when it is, it should be going home with you. In the worst-case scenario, you grind it and make the world's most delicious meatballs or sausages; in the best case, you'll braise it slowly with some root vegetables and create an ethereal ragu," he says.

"I'm not claiming to be a pioneer here," he says. "This is the premise of the California cuisine epitomized by Alice Water, Jeremiah Tower and Judy Rodgers in the early 80s." The recipes in *The Babbo Cookbook* do not include demi-glaces or reduced stocks often used

in restaurant cookbooks. Batali says reductions mask the pure flavors of the ingredients in a dish and they get sticky when they sit on a plate.

"They are not the lessons I learned during the time I spent in Italy. What I observed there was a looser, less reduced sauce on the plate that was closer to a pan juice, maybe 'broken' with some rivulets of olive oil at the last minute and certainly not thickened with roux or any other liaison. Many of my contemporaries in other restaurants are observing the same thing and treating much of their food with similar lightness, particularly in the sauce and condiment departments," he says.

Batali explains that "what ends up on your table reflects a lot on you, the cook. I enjoy using offbeat ingredients like tripe or cardoons in many of our dishes because New York City's voracious eaters want the intellectual stimulation of trying something few of



BABBO

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