

Batali's master class, cheek to jowl

One of New York's most celebrated chefs is coming to pick our brains.

Look up a Web site on New York chef and offal apologist Mario Batali and there is his philosophy: "Mario Batali believes that olive oil is as precious as gold, that shorts are acceptable attire for every season and that food, like most things, is best when left to its own simple beauty." What it doesn't tell you is that he eats head cheese for breakfast.

Head cheese? That's right, the rendered-down meat from a pig's head. Put simply, he sees beauty in brawn. He's also partial to a plate of cold spaghetti first thing in the morning, chilli sauce optional.

His favourite offal dishes, at any time, are tripe *alla Parmigiana* and beef-cheek ravioli, both of which are on the menu at his flagship restaurant, Babbo, alongside the head cheese (politely called *testa*), calf's brain "Francobolli" and tamer dishes such as grilled lamb chops "Scottadita" and spaghettini with artichokes and lobster.

If you think such culinary adventurism might be off-putting, you would be wrong. Not only has Babbo scooped a swag of awards, including the James Beard Foundation Best New Restaurant in 1998 and Citysearch Best Italian in 2000, but, like Batali's two other Manhattan restaurants, it's also booked out every night, often weeks in advance. Even Batali, who doesn't come across as the boastful type, says Babbo has a reputation for converting the offal-resistant.

Which might be reassuring if you're thinking of checking his master class session at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival later this month with a promise of sweetbreads, pork cheek and *guancia* (cured pork jowl). "One of the reasons I am so fond of offal is that in the

traditional Italian family they had only one pig, so of course they didn't just take the pork chops and throw the rest away," he says on the phone from New York.

"Every part of that pig was eaten with joy and with glee. I like that approach. I also like the large dimension of flavour that offal has. And, in the kitchen, it's more fun to do things with unusual meats – you get bored cooking steaks the whole time."

This will be the 41-year-old Batali's first visit to Australia, and he keeps saying how excited he is. We are,

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too, because while it's always a coup for the festival to snare a big-name chef it's especially so in the case of someone who doesn't leap at the first opportunity to get out of his kitchen.

He's a quaint, old-fashioned chef; he actually cooks five nights a week at Babbo and most lunchtimes at his more casual restaurants, Lupa and Esca, which he co-owns with his chef partners. "Cooking is just my favourite thing to do," he says.

He'll be doing a lot of it during his one, short week in Australia. As well as the solo classes, he'll join *Gondola on the Murray* television chef Stefano de Pieri, whom

he's yet to meet, for a master class in Italian home cooking – "from Manhattan to Mildura" – and for a big slap-up dinner at Melbourne's Match restaurant.

The menu, as told by De Pieri, sounds terrific. Maybe some *piadina* (rolled flatbread sandwiches) with prosciutto to start; then tortellini in brodo; perhaps a braised leg of goat or salt-pumped lamb, an outback specialty; and, somewhere in there, a tripe dish.

"[Festival director] Sylvia Johnson was adamant we shouldn't have tripe, so of course we had to do it," says a mischievous sounding de Pieri. "We might serve it with some polenta."

The two chefs are kindred in their influences and their approach to food, founded on a love of regional produce, simple techniques and pure, clear flavours. The Seattle-born Batali describes his cuisine as just the way an Italian would cook if he or she lived in New York State, with regard to the seasons and available ingredients.

There is rarely an Italian classic on his menus; instead, dishes are inspired by various regions. He lived for three years, from 1989, in a village between Bologna and Florence, but his favourite food region is the Amalfi coast. "Lots of seafood, very simple," he says.

Batali is big in America, and not only for his restaurants and his books, *Simple Italian Food* and *Mario Batali Holiday Food*. His cooking program, *Molto Mario*, screens twice a day on the Television Food Network, its popularity no doubt partly explained by the chef's insistence that all cooking demonstrations be done in real time.



As well, he owns an all-Italian wine shop, unusual both in its range ("We don't pretend to be comprehensive, we just sell what we like to drink") and its diversions. One room is devoted to classes in wine and food pairing; another is where Batali makes the *salumi* or cured meats for his restaurants. Prosciutto of goose is a specialty.

Seems this chef has some pretty handy friends, too. Good Living's Luke Mangan tells how, when in New

York recently, he ran into Batali out having drinks with U2 guitarist The Edge and REM's Michael Stipe. Cool.

In his spare time, when this father of two isn't taking the kids to the Bronx zoo or Central Park, Batali's busy planning his new restaurant, due to open by the end of the year. It will be a pizzeria, though not, of course, your average pizzeria. "Of course, there is a lot of pizza in New York, but most of it is not very good," he says. "Ours will be in the Italian style, so there won't be too many

ingredients on top. We won't be doing 'the works', as they say in Manhattan."

There won't be any offal, either. As even Batali knows, you can have too much of a good thing.

Mario Batali will cook at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival master class on March 23 and 24. The festival runs until April 1, www.melbfoodwinefest.com.au

Luke Mangan will feature some of Batali's recipes next week in *Eat in*.

Beauty in brawn: Mario Batali's riding into town.