

Eat Out

The city's best restaurants and bars

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Improvise an Italian meal

Wanna cook like a rock star? It's easier than you think. Chefs Mario Batali and Mark Ladner, coauthors of *Molto Gusto*, show us how to wing a seasonal Italian meal. By **Daniel Gritzer** and **Jordana Rothman**

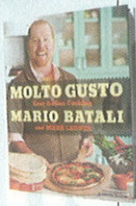


STEP 1 STOCK THE ESSENTIAL ITALIAN PANTRY

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A handful of essentials is all you need to turn your market haul into something special. Mario Batali tells us what goods he can't live without.

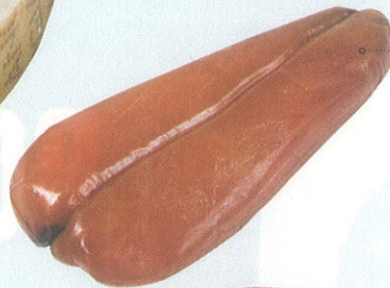


Pasta Batali considers the mass-market brands Barilla and De Cecco to be above average. He recommends boiling any pasta 1.5 to 2 minutes less than the directions state, then cooking it the rest of the way in the sauce.

Pancetta The cured pork delivers a richness that can work as a counterpoint to shellfish or vegetables, or "as the main event, such as in spaghetti alla carbonara." Batali also likes it for its versatility.



Parmigiano-Reggiano The diversity of Italian cheeses means that you can't easily substitute one for another, but Parmigiano-Reggiano—"the undisputed king"—is Batali's "desert-island cheese above all others."



Bottarga This preserved fish roe (either mullet or tuna) can add a unique salinity to bitter greens and fruits like blood orange and cantaloupe. It also brings "an incredible umami component to simple, oil-based pastas," says Batali.



Olive oil "I use a lighter oil to cook with, but prefer intensely flavored ones to finish [a dish], because I really appreciate that powerful olive taste," says Batali.



Bread crumbs These are excellent for adding textural contrast to a dish. "Use them in place of cheese on top of pasta," suggests Batali. "Everyone should make their own."



Vinegar If there's one kind you must have in your cabinet, it's red-wine vinegar, and a cheap one at that. "A great salad dressing has great olive oil and an inexpensive red-wine vinegar."



Capers and caperberries Capers (the flower bud of the caper bush) and caperberries (the plant's fruit) add a bright, salty note to many recipes. "Use them in anything," says Batali.

PHOTOGRAPHS: OLEO RUBEN; FOOD STYLING: LUCY QUINTANILLA; SALT-PACKED CAPERS, SOTTARAS, BUSONATI, POLLESA, MARKET DE UNTER, (P. 214-605-8658); CUTRERA PRIMO OLIVE OIL; PASTA: PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO; MILDON SEA SALT; BREAD CRUMBS: MULTIPLE LOCATIONS; PANCETTA: SALUMERIA BELLESE (376-376 EIGHTH AVE. AT 29TH ST., 212-796-7376)

STEP 2

SHOP FOR THE REST

Now, it's time to choose the main ingredients—and learn how to pick out the best and most appetizing produce for an off-the-cuff meal. We meet our pro, Mark Ladner, Mario Batali's deputy and executive chef—partner of Del Posto, Otto and Lupa, at the Union Square Greenmarket. His strategy: "I go through the market once to see what's out there and then double back."

As promised, Ladner whips around the northern edge of the park, inspecting the quality of the day's haul, homing in on just a few items that catch his eye. Instinct and spontaneity play a role: "Trust yourself. If something looks flaccid, tired and wilted, that probably shouldn't be your first choice. If it looks really fresh and vibrant, it might be."

He stops for a leafy bunch of mesclun at Two Guys from Woodbridge, and is excited to find a rare green called minutina at the stand. "This is the first time I've ever seen this at the market," he says. "Anytime that you see something that's exotic and that is in really good condition you should try it."

The season should provide inspiration too. "Asparagus are perfect right now," says Ladner, picking out a purple-tipped bunch, along with some fragrant garlic chives from S&SO

Produce. "Good asparagus should be bright and sprightly, with moist stems."

At Rick Bishop's stand (better known as Mountain Sweet Berry Farm), he picks up the ultimate spring vegetable: a bundle of ramps. The wild leeks are pungent and oniony—and available for only a brief period in May. "Meet farmers, talk to them, be a generally inquisitive person, and you'll become comfortable enough to ask for advice and suggestions," our chef says.

Ladner purchases a half dozen eggs at Knoll Krest Farm, and at Bodhitree acquires young greens for a simple salad. "I always like to mix some mustard greens [into my salads], because they are so spicy," he says.

As we leave Union Square with bags in hand (total contents costing less than \$20), Ladner stresses the importance of a well-stocked pantry (which we have, thanks to his boss). "It's like a painter's palette," he says. "You have all of these existing resources that allow you to have a wider breadth of options."

With that in mind, we head to the Del Posto kitchen to learn how to combine our market finds with Batali's picks to create some simple, seasonal dishes.



Mark Ladner



STEP 3

MAKE IT A MEAL

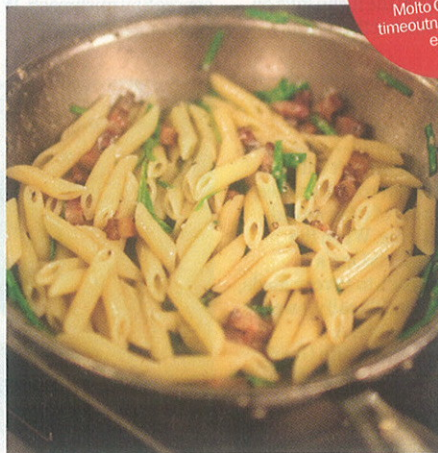
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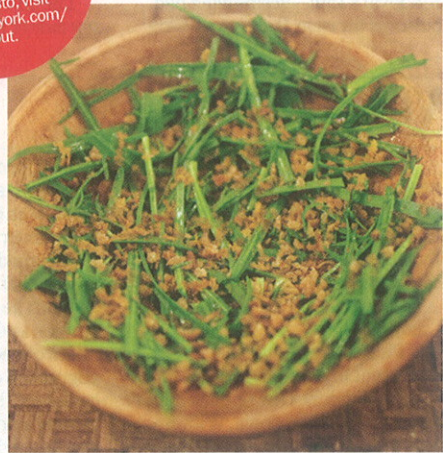
Asparagus salad

Ladner decides to combine the asparagus and the Parmesan to make a fresh antipasto. "I prefer to serve vegetables raw if they are in good condition," he says, chopping the stalks into snappy chunks. With the Parmesan, some water, a bit of olive oil and loads of cracked pepper, he makes a thick, emulsified dressing for the salad. "You could use a dressing like this with peas, fava beans or asparagus—the three major spring vegetables," says Ladner. The final element: acidity. "Add a squeeze of lemon or pair it with a bright wine."



Penne alla Gricia

When it comes to pasta, Ladner says he doesn't like to improvise that much, preferring to riff on "basic, classic preparations." This dish hits both notes: Ladner describes penne *alla Gricia* as a "white version of *amatriciana*"—an archetypal Italian pasta dish made with tomatoes, guanciale and pecorino. In this case, Ladner tweaks the recipe to include garlic chives and pancetta, and mixes in Parmesan with the pecorino. The finished dish is simple and rustic, glazed with a peppery sauce of pork fat, cheese and water.



Minutina salad

We pluck a few blades from the bunch of minutina to taste the unusual green—it's a little spicy, with a rough surface and a moist interior. "It has this incredibly succulent texture," Ladner says. He chops the leaves, then drizzles them with olive oil. "If you have a heartier green like this, [you can] use bottarga," he says, grating some on top. "It is so pungent, it needs a stronger flavor component to help carry it." To the finished dish, he adds a squeeze of lemon and bread crumbs fried in olive oil—a good trick to amp up the texture of any salad.

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