

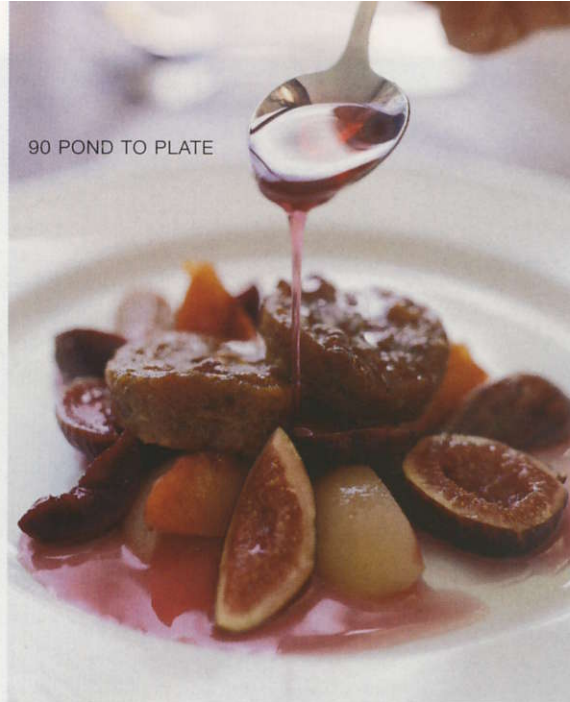
COVER: chocolate hazelnut whirls
(from *Sugar and Spice*, page 78). Photography by Michael Paul.



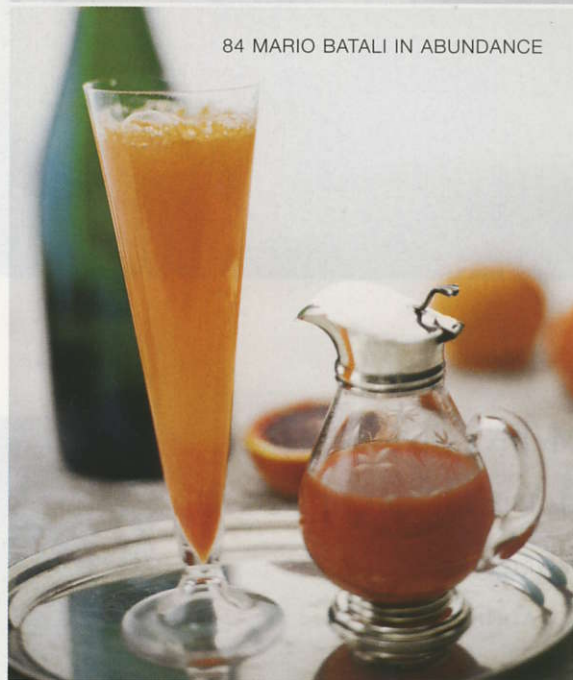
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90 POND TO PLATE

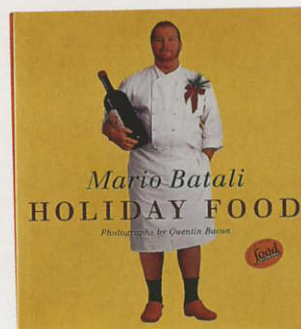
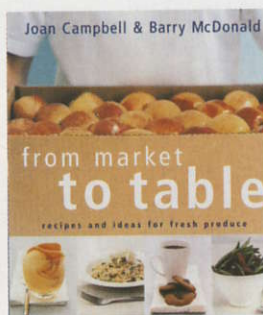


84 MARIO BATALI IN ABUNDANCE



100 THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT





> **SIMPLY THE BEST** The Art of Seasonal Cooking, by Tamasin Day-Lewis (Cassell Illustrated, available through Allen & Unwin, rrp\$65). Following on her lovely book, *Art of the Tart*, this talented food writer has produced another winner. Enticing photographs by David Loftus, make you want to cook every dish in this erudite seasonal book. **MA**

FESTIVE FOODS (Christmas Cooking around the World), by Hanne Kruse (New International Publications Ltd rrp\$38.50) celebrates the festive season as it is experienced globally with recipes from a range of different cultures from areas as diverse as Northern Europe and South America. Order through www.newint.org **MA**

LA GAVROCHE COOKBOOK, by Michel Roux Jr (Cassell, rrp\$70). The famed French restaurant Le Gavroche opened by Albert and Michel Roux about 35 years ago is still revered

as one of London's best restaurants – no small achievement in a fickle industry. Michel Roux Jr (son of Albert and nephew of Michel) is now rattling the pans and has taken a selection of the restaurant's recipes from its lifespan. Thankfully, these have been adapted for the home cook, albeit a knowledgeable one. From the more hearty braised shoulder of spring lamb to the famous (and luxurious) brie stuffed with truffles the dishes are very French, well balanced and approachable. **AL**

NEW ENTERTAINING IN THE FRENCH STYLE, by Roger Vergé (Thames & Hudson by Flammarion, rrp\$70). Everything produced by this acclaimed French chef is beautiful. His latest book contains lovely illustrations and recipes from the Provençal region in which he lives. **MA**

HERBES DE PROVENCE, by Anthony Gardiner (New Holland rrp\$49.95). Travelling across Provence,

the author has selected seven of the region's top chefs to produce recipes which contain the herbs common to the area. Each chapter is named after the herbs: thyme, rosemary, bay, sage, fennel, marjoram and winter savory. **MA**

GASTRONOMY OF ITALY, by Anna del Conte (Viking, rrp\$100). The dishes in this book make the mouth water and the soul yearn for Italy. Anna del Conte has a solid knowledge of this wonderful cuisine, and knows that central to this is the history of Italy's regions. Readers will find the A-Z of ingredients, terms and techniques invaluable. Impressive also is the chapter on the wines of Italy – demonstrating the author's understanding that no discussion of Italian gastronomy would be complete without it. This book would be an indispensable guide to any gastro-tour of Italy. **AL**

FROM MARKET TO TABLE, by Joan Campbell & Barry McDonald (Penguin Books, rrp\$35) this >



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IT'S HARD NOT to get swept up in the phenomenon that is Mario Batali. This is a man who is larger than life, who exudes humour and intelligence, and who is quite clearly as passionate about food as he is about life. He's a man who believes "shorts are acceptable attire for every season" and who has turned orange rubber clogs into a statement of style.

Mario is the US's renaissance man of food. He is chef and owner of several very successful New York restaurants: the multi-award-winning Babbo in Greenwich Village (where he still cooks almost daily), Lupa and Esca, as well as a new pizzeria called Otto (at 1 Fifth Avenue, two blocks from Babbo) due to open by the end of November. But his empire goes way beyond the kitchen. He's authored two books, *Holiday Food* and *Mario Batali Simple Italian Food* (Random House, \$49.95 and \$75), and is one of the most recognised food personalities in the US, thanks to his two television programs which screen on the Food Network. Australian audiences got a taste of Mario's culinary and pedagogical skills during the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival Masterclasses earlier this year, at which he was the star presenter.

Through his media exposure, Mario is almost single-handedly educating US audiences about Italian food – its history,

Mario spent three years living in Italy, cooking at La Volta, a mountainside trattoria in Borgo Capanne on the border of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany. After an eclectic past – including teenage years living in Spain, a stint in the early 1980s cooking with the temperamental but brilliant British chef Marco Pierre White, and experience in the kitchens of hotel chain Four Seasons in California – this period defined his style, introducing him not only to the regional nature of Italian food, but also to the myriad possibilities of cooking offal. In traditional, rural Italy, he says, each family would have a pig, and it would be butchered and every part of it would be used – not just the loins and the chops, but also the brain, the kidney and the liver. Offal is a major feature of the signature dishes at Babbo, from *testa* (also known as 'head cheese', the rendered-down meat from the pig's head) to *guanciale* (pork jowl, an essential ingredient in *bucatini all'amatriciana*). Mario also makes his own *salumi* (cured meats).

Perfectly pristine ingredients, combined sensibly and cooked properly, are what makes Italian food taste so good, says Mario. In his New York restaurants, he imports six key ingredients from Italy: extra-virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, prosciutto di Parma, parmigiano-reggiano, sea salt and pasta. "There are some ingre-

MARIO BATALI IN ABUNDANCE

WHEREVER HE GOES THIS LARGER THAN LIFE CHEF IS TURNING HEADS, BUT IT IS LESS FOR HIS UNIQUE DRESS SENSE THAN FOR HIS PASSION FOR SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT REGIONAL ITALIAN FOOD. OVERLEAF, HE USES SOME OF HIS FAVOURITE INGREDIENTS IN A CHRISTMAS EVE DINNER. **Portrait** Ruven Afanador **Photography** Quentin Bacon

its very regional nature and the differences and similarities between Italian food in situ and abroad. *Molto Mario* screens twice a day, every day, and features the chef and three guests. In each show, Mario introduces a single region of Italy, or even a micro-region within a region. In the half-hour program he whips up a full meal – antipasto, pasta, main course and dessert (or sometimes a discussion of the specialty cheeses of the region) – simultaneously offering fascinating gastronomic facts, figures and history. His other show, *Mario Eats Italy*, shot exclusively in Italy, sees Mario travelling the length and breadth of the country discussing the produce of each region and teaching his 'travelling companion' (who is also a cook) how to use the ingredients.

Simplicity is a word often associated with Mario's food. "[Simplicity] is one of the most fundamental and, at the same time, most elusive keys to preparing food well. It is the absolute cornerstone of the spectacular and glorious regional Italian fare that has so influenced my approach to cooking," he writes in *Mario Batali Simple Italian Food*. But, he says, it's often a synergy of simple foods that makes great meals: "Some dishes are combinations of two simple things, so they appear more complex."

dients for which there are no substitutes. Other than that we try to work around what we have," he says. Seasonality is of paramount importance: "What I try to get across is that for Italians, almost the entire success of the meal is decided at the market," he states. "Food in season is spiritually better for you. You get hold of it, then you let it go. It's the ebb and flow of life."

Mario credits "my grandma, my dad, my mom, my aunts and uncles" as his greatest cooking inspirations. "They prepared the food for festive family gatherings. I'm from a big family, so when we had cousins over it ended up being 25 to 30 people. So all the get-togethers throughout the year – such as Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter – were traded off between the families. I learnt to appreciate their holiday cooking very early on." His suggestions for a Christmas Eve dinner are overleaf.

Holiday food, says Mario, is all about abundance. "It's not about food all neatly arranged on an individual plate. It's about big platters of comforting food, or food that is associated with a particular occasion. It also involves new traditions, which then become a part of the celebrations of the future." Food, he says, means "both tradition and creation, satisfaction, family, love".

(*Recipe index, page 168.*) **Text: Sally Webb**