

## FOOD &amp; DRINK

## The Joy of Undercooking

This recipe showcases Mr. Batali's trick for making pasta: He recommends undercooking the pasta slightly, then combining it with the sauce and a bit of pasta water and steaming it all together for two minutes. The result (see below) is al dente and infused with flavor.

**PENNETTE WITH SUMMER SQUASH AND RICOTTA**

Recipe courtesy of "Molto Gusto: Easy Italian Cooking" by Mario Batali (Ecco, 2010)  
Serves 6

Kosher salt  
1 cup fresh ricotta  
6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, plus extra for serving  
2 to 3 tablespoons warm water  
1 pound summer squash or zucchini, or a combination, cut lengthwise in half and sliced into 1/3-inch-thick half-moons  
Maldon or other flaky sea salt  
1 pound pennette rigate pasta  
6 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh mint  
Coarsely ground black pepper

■ Bring 6 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot and add 3 tablespoons kosher salt.

■ Meanwhile, whisk the ricotta and 3 tablespoons of the olive oil together in a small bowl. Add the Parmigiano, whisking until it is evenly incorporated. Whisk in 2 tablespoons warm water, then whisk in another tablespoon of water if necessary to loosen the consistency.

■ Heat the remaining 3 tablespoons olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the squash and cook, stirring, until just tender and golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Season well with Maldon salt and remove from the heat.

■ Drop the pasta into the boiling water and cook until just al dente. Drain the pasta, reserving 1/3 cup of the pasta water.

■ Add the pasta and the reserved pasta water to the squash, stirring and tossing over medium heat to mix well. Cover, reduce the heat to low, and allow to steam together for 2 minutes.

■ Stir in the mint, season with Maldon salt if necessary and with pepper, and transfer the pasta to a serving bowl. Garnish with dollops of the whipped ricotta and serve immediately, with additional grated Parmigiano on the side.



# Batali Fires All Burners

Next for the chef: a Singapore eatery, a New York grocery, grandmas on TV

By KATY McLAUGHLIN

**M**ARIO BATALI, whose collection of 14 upscale restaurants in New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas had \$140 million in sales last year, he says, will chart new territory this year. He's getting into the grocery business with a 50,000-square-foot Italian gourmet emporium in Manhattan, slated for mid-September. For the first time, his company is replicating restaurant concepts: His Mozza restaurants will open in Singapore this fall, and most likely there will be a Pizzeria Mozza in Orange County next spring. He also plans a television show in which "the old babes" of Sicily—Italian grandmothers—show him their secrets.

Interviewed in Los Angeles, the chef discussed how he makes money, where the Batali brand is headed next, and why *sotto voce* works best for "behavior modification."

**The Wall Street Journal: The prime-time tables at your Los Angeles restaurants, Pizzeria Mozza and Osteria Mozza, are largely booked. Isn't there a recession on, or are your restaurants bouncing back?**

**Mr. Batali:** Our restaurants did \$140 million last year. Our sales were down by 9% to 10%, but we probably made more profit. As for the recession in New York, it's over from our point of view.

As the recession became a big thing, we started to evaluate how we operate our business. We're really managing labor costs—if you're not going to be full at 11 p.m., you cut people. We now check invoices across restaurants so we know who gets the best price, and we demand that for everyone.

This is not exactly new stuff. We don't have any Wharton MBAs. We're still very Mom-and-Pop-y.

**You're getting into the retail food business later this year when you open Eataly (the Manhattan gourmet market). Why get into groceries?**

My father-in-law [Miles Cahn, co-founder of Coach Farm, a cheesemaker] told me never to go into the grocery business. It's a tough margin. You buy things and then sit around waiting for them to go bad. But I think New York needs a gastronomic destination like Harrods in London or Fauchon in Paris. [Eataly will be an American version of a gourmet food store in Turin, Italy.]

We're trying to preserve the great ingredients in Italy that would be otherwise diminished. We're flying in canned, preserved products, like San Marzano [canned] tomatoes. We'll have 10 kinds of stone-ground polenta, for example. The fish, meat and produce will be from America. We'll have six restaurants in there.

It's a smaller margin than we're used to, but we're predicting \$50 to \$100 million in annual sales. Of course, we'll do a lot of work. I hope it will benefit our restaurant businesses—hopefully it will help us source new products.

**How else is your Mom-and-Pop company growing up?**

We have 14 one-offs. My partner [Joe Bastianich] is looking for a repeatable concept. He's looking at Otto and Mozza. We're doing an Osteria Mozza and Pizzeria Mozza in Singapore in mid-November. I'm clearly not cooking—I'll have to go three times a year. We're taking 30 of our people from here over there. And we're opening a Pizzeria Mozza in Orange County next spring, though we're still negotiating so it's not a sure thing.

**You surprised me in October last year when you eliminated the informal Enoteca portion of Del**

**Posto, your most expensive restaurant in New York. Many of your competitors were doing the opposite—they were putting in informal bars to pick up revenue while big spending was down. What's the strategy?**

We realized if we want a luxury-market restaurant, we need to give people what they need. We were giving mixed messages about the restaurant. It needs to be a calm, serene place. Also, it was costing us the same amount of money to give them [diners] the meal at a discount—it was the same tablecloths, the same ingredients. People were coming to the Enoteca instead of eating in the main dining room, so we were losing that business. And they weren't getting what they wanted.

**You also began offering a \$29 lunch at Del Posto, which is often mentioned on food blogs as one of the great dining deals. That seems like a contradiction to the broader strategy.**

It's \$29 because lunch is a soft business in that part of town, and people come back for the full experience. It's better to have a busy lunch instead of a dead one. We won't get rid of it when the economy gets better, because we like doing 100 covers for lunch.

**What's next for you on TV and why do you do so much of it? Is it because being a TV chef is great marketing for your brand?**

I do it because I like it. Oh, yes, my celebrity has fallen into this and wow, has that paid off. But I did Food Network back when they had [fewer] viewers because it gave legitimacy to my point of view.

I'm working on three television projects. I'm talking to the Food Network. I still love them. We're just talking but they love this idea of traveling around and exploring delicious

and exotic foods in America or outside of it.

For Sundance Channel, we're talking about a show with me and the old babes in Sicily as opposed to movie stars in Spain. [Mr. Batali was recently featured in a PBS series in which he toured Spain with the actress Gwyneth Paltrow.] My dream is a scene where I drive around in a Cinquecento [a small Fiat] and get out of the car with three old ladies. It's about figuring out recipes with little old ladies and grandmas in Italy.

The last one is the traditional teaching-cooking idea—the old "dump and stir." It would have philanthropist guests.

**You've had a partnerships since 1996 with Joe Bastianich, who owns your restaurants with you. Could you have been as successful without him?**

No, I could not have been as successful without Joe Bastianich. He balances my real hot passion. My passion might make me throw people out of my restaurants. I don't really even yell anymore. If I yell, the immediate response is I feel remorse and I have to go apologize. If my immediate goal is behavior modification, *sotto voce* is better.

**I understand you have recently lost a lot of weight by refocusing at least part of your diet on vegetables. How much did you lose and how long did it take you?**

I lost 35 pounds and it took me about a year and a half. I'm still working on it. I started eating less meat during the day, eating half the portions that even I myself would put in front of me, and I focused on a lot of raw vegetables.

► Watch Mario Batali explain how to cook with fennel, Jerusalem artichokes and dandelion greens at [WSJ.com/Food](http://WSJ.com/Food).