

up close



Dishing it Out

Chef Mario Batali shares his expert opinions on everything from club sandwiches at the turn to the future of American cuisine

BY AMY LEVIN-EPSTEIN

PHOTO BY JEFF WEINER

Mario Batali is making a golf ball pizza. Well, to be more precise, he is delicately placing golf balls on a margherita pie and then holding his inedible masterpiece up to humor our photographer for this story. And he is smiling. Perhaps surprising, because it is 10 a.m. on a frigid January morning at his Greenwich Village eatery, Otto Enoteca and Pizzeria, and, as documented in Bill Buford's 2006 kitchen memoir "Heat," Batali is known for a fondness for long nights, not early mornings. Although he is arguably the most respected Italian chef this side of Rome, he's not only comfortable playing a photogenic caricature of himself, he's happy to do it.

"When I started on Food Network in '94, there were probably four famous chefs: Wolfgang Puck, Julia Child, Jacques Pepin and Graham Kerr. Now there are at least twenty that people can name," says Batali, who explains that this unmasking of the man behind a meal has turned diners into foodies, and he likes that. "Making people more intelligent about food makes being a restaurateur a lot more fun. Maybe they're not happy about every dish. But they're certainly not nearly as perplexed," says Batali, seriously.

It's hard not to see his passion for his life's

work. "It used to be that you would go to the theater and get a bite, or go to the game and get a bite. At this point 'the bite' can become the entire experience for a group of friends who are gastronomically inclined and want to go and find out about the quirkiness of the chef or know that it's the season for ramps or razor clams or whatever," he says effusively.

Batali grew up in the Seattle area, but now splits his time between New York and northern Michigan. He originally came to the Met Area in 1978, when he enrolled as a freshman at Rutgers University, studying Spanish, theater





and economics — all good things for a future chef to know. While a student, he had a part-time job at the aptly named Stuff Yer Face restaurant near the Rutgers campus in New Brunswick, N.J., where he honed his stromboli-making skills. After earning his undergraduate degree in 1982, Batali briefly trained at Le Cordon Bleu in London, but wanted a more hands-on experience. He worked as an assistant to London chef Marco Pierre White, and went on to stints in kitchens in Paris, Provence, San Francisco and Santa Barbara, California. In 1989, he left for northern Italy, where he spent three years becoming intimately familiar with the region's cuisine, in preparation for his return to the U.S.

Upon this return, Batali came to New York and opened the hugely successful Po, spurring a lively restaurant row on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village. Five years later, with business partner Joe Bastianich, he opened the doors at Babbo Ristorante e Enoteca, still one of New York's toughest places to reserve a

table. Batali became a pop culture icon, a status that grew with the popularity of *Iron Chef America* on the Food Network and peaked when director Wes Anderson animated him in last year's *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

"He called me and said 'I got this rabbit who dresses in orange Crocs and looks like a chef. Do you think you can swing it [the voiceover]?' I'm like, 'I think I can swing it,'" recalls Batali, smiling. He even launched his own style of the frumpy footwear and, much to the dismay of fashion mavens, wore them on a recent trip to the White House for a special episode of *Iron Chef* that saw him paired with Emeril Lagasse, opposite Bobby Flay and White House chef Cristeta Comerford. (Batali raves about meeting the First Lady, saying "She is heroic.") He brushes off the Croc-related criticism. "I wore Italian operating room clogs fourteen years ago, before Crocs. As if I need to squeeze my feet into some long snake-like head...that's not my game."

This refusal to worry about status symbols comes up again, when he's talking about one game he *does* play — golf. "A lot of people are very obsessed with their score," he says. "I'd rather [have] a really tricky shot behind a 70-foot palm tree with my 80-foot-high wedge, and maybe make it, and maybe not." His Handicap Index, for the record, hovers around 16.0, but his goal is to get that to single digits. In the way of that lofty ambition is his day job.

Whenever he is discussing food, whether it be about an onion-y sandwich he ate at the turn at Augusta National, or cooking with his kids, his words are ripe with enthusiasm. "Today we had crispy polenta with maple syrup and a side of ham," he says, enunciating the word "polenta" and advising parents that to get kids to eat new things, let them play sous chef. "Because once they've participated all along, from raw ingredients to finished dish, of course they're going to eat it. They've got way too much invested in it."

A typical day at home in New York for Batali consists of this morning meal ritual with his kids, followed by some type of exercise. He then hops on his Vespa and visits his Manhattan restaurants, including Otto, Lupa, Del Posto and Casa Mono, before meetings with Bastianich and various staff members. He insists that he didn't see this empire coming, and doesn't want to merely be a brand name who forgets what a kitchen looks like.

"I don't have this manifest destiny to take over and be in every town in America," he says. Although he has a combined fifteen

Spaghetti all'Amatriciana

From the new book *Molto Gusto*, by Mario Batali and Mark Ladner (Ecco, 2010)

Kosher salt

¼ cup extra virgin olive oil

4 ounces guanciale or pancetta, or good American bacon, cut into ½-inch-wide strips

1 medium red onion, halved lengthwise, ends trimmed, and cut lengthwise into ¼-inch-wide slices

¼ cup tomato paste

1½ to 2 tablespoons hot red pepper flakes

¾ cup Pomi strained tomatoes, simmered until reduced by half

1 pound spaghetti

½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, plus extra for serving

½ cup grated pecorino romano

⅓ cup coarsely chopped fresh Italian parsley



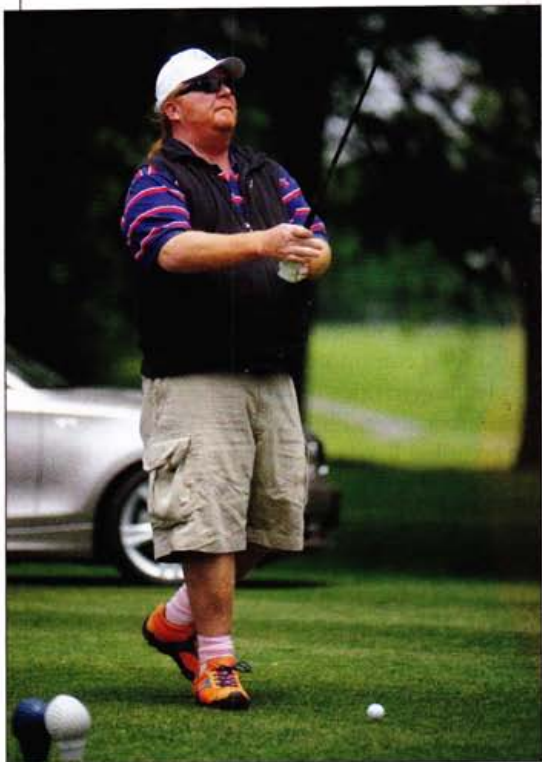
Bring 6 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot and add 3 tablespoons kosher salt.

Meanwhile, combine the oil, guanciale, and onion in another large pot and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until the guanciale is lightly browned and the onion is softened, about 7 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste and red pepper flakes and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in the tomato sauce and remove from the heat.

Drop the pasta into the boiling water and cook until just al dente. Drain, reserving about ½ cup of the pasta water.

Add the pasta and ¼ cup of the pasta water to the guanciale and stir and toss over medium heat until the pasta is well-coated (add a splash or two more of the reserved pasta water if necessary to loosen the sauce). Stir in the cheeses and parsley and serve immediately, with additional grated Parmigiano on the side.





restaurants in New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles (where Osteria Mozza is run largely by another partner, Nancy Silverton), he's not going to Boston, Chicago or London. "Those customers are serious about food. They would be disdainful of me not being there and justly so," says Batali, adding that "a lot of chefs have done that and they're learning, because they're all closing those places." He notes exceptions to this category with Puck and Lagasse. The latter joins him, along with Boston-based chef Michael Schlow, on another playing field, the golf course.

"We have a lot of pressure in our world, so when we go out to play golf and have lunch it's a very casual experience," says Batali. Playing golf, it turns out, isn't all that different from cooking. "The more you do a repetitive motion, the better you get at it... in the same sense with a sauté pan as with a swing," he explains.

Batali started playing golf while at Rutgers, but began devoting more time to his game four years ago. In season, he plays a couple times a week, mostly at his home course, nearby Bayonne Golf Club in New Jersey. He calls it "the greatest golf experience in the tri-state area. I like that there are no golf carts. I like that it's relatively difficult and that the wind can become a major factor, and I like my caddies," says Batali.

At Bayonne, Batali plays with a group of regular partners that includes Jimmy Fallon



and actor Billy Crudup. "Crudup's really good. Fallon's going to be good. He doesn't play enough. He got this pesky new job and it's really messed with his game," laughs Batali of the *Late Night* host. His other favorite golf pals are his two sons, Benno (age 13) and Leo (age 11). "My kids are good golfers. They can hit the long ball," he shares proudly, adding that his favorite round ever was at Kiawah Island (host of the 2012 PGA Championship) last spring. "Benno was hitting the ball really well," he recalls, "and we had a great caddie."

When he and Gwyneth Paltrow filmed the documentary *Spain... On The Road Again*, in which they ate their way around the country, Batali played golf in the Basque region, Valencia, and on the island of Mallorca. He's also played in Ireland, but admits his disappointment with the American-style K Club. "I wanted to play at an Irish course with a three-foot wide fairway and some dudes who cursed at me for being a bad golfer," says Batali. On his wish list? The west coast, and in particular, Bandon Dunes. "I'd like to go from Torrey Pines all the way to Whistler. Take three or four weeks and drive, play two rounds of golf [a day], have some delicious snacks, and move forward," says Batali in what sounds like a sequel to his trip with Paltrow.

Not making his wish list? Yet another pre-packaged club sandwich at the turn. "Tom Colicchio had this little snack bar out at Liberty National and it was really, really delicious," says Batali. He reminisces about a course in Mallorca. "At the turn they had torta espanola [a Spanish omelette] on little pieces of baguette," says Batali, who says he has no plans to write a golf cookbook, but if he did he'd infuse it with local flavors, like he did with *Mario Tailgates NASCAR Style*. "Texas barbecue, North Carolina barbecue, New Hampshire lobster roll, Dover crab



Clockwise from top left: Mario at a recent golf outing to benefit the NYC Parks Foundation, appearing on the Martha Stewart Show, and scooting around town.





Golf is rarely far from Batali's mind, even when he's in the kitchen.

cakes... certainly in Florida you'd want to have a nice fried oyster sandwich. The problem with the food at most of the golf courses is that it's made by people who are trying to make people feel that they can have the same sandwich in every town," says Batali.

Although he is known for his thirst for wine as much as his appetite for food, he sticks to Gatorade and Arnold Palmers on the course. "I'm still under the dreamy conception that I'll play better if I haven't been drinking," he jokes. Except, of course, if he happens to be playing with *Legends of The Fall* actor Aidan Quinn. "On the 9th hole on a cold day at Bayonne, he pulled out a little flask of Irish whiskey and it did make it better. We were bone cold and a shot like that added a little extra grease to the joints," says Batali.

Off the course, Batali says he prefers classic, simple dishes, like the seafood at Pearl Oyster Bar in the West Village, the eggs baked in tomato sauce for breakfast at Morandi, around the corner, and the "sexy" yet "comfortable" atmosphere at Balthazar in Soho.

His new cookbook, *Molto Gusto*, takes its

inspiration from Otto as well as this lighter culinary viewpoint. "There are no main courses [at Otto]. There are no meat and potatoes," says Batali. He hopes that his new book will encourage home chefs to eschew not only pasta with jarred sauce and frozen meatballs, but pre-made pizza altogether.

Batali's next culinary projects include vetting a particular race of cow. Seriously. In February, he went to Italy to source a strain of cattle that he may feature in a massive Italian food emporium that he and Bastianich are planning to open in July in the former Toy Building on lower Fifth Avenue. The complex will be called Eataly, and will include up to six new food stores and restaurants.

If all these projects don't give Batali enough to chew on, he is also giving back with his children's charity, the Mario Batali Foundation, which will host its first celebrity golf tournament on May 18 at Wilshire Country Club in Los Angeles. Batali has already finagled some A-list chefs and entertainment types. "All the guys from *Entourage* have committed," says Batali, who adds that Fallon will also be teeing off.

Batali has come full circle, using food to create a brand which brings good food to more people than he ever planned, and helps those less fortunate in the process. So he will do a lot of cooking, a bunch of business planning, and the occasional mugging for the camera, with or without golf balls (he calls the situation on this particular pie "a terrible lie").

And like many entrepreneurs, he'll take the little time left over to be with his family — and hit the golf course. If he gets some flack for his footwear or his famous friends (bloggers referred to Paltrow and Batali as "Beauty and The Beast"), he's okay with that.

"I have no idea what [people] think of me anymore. [Celebrity] works. It works if you understand it. I can still walk anonymously into, like, a shoe store. If I'm in the grocery store, I'm an important figure standing next to the tomato sauce. But next to the Manolo Blahniks [shoes] I'm nobody. And in fact, I'm probably in the way."

In his off-the-cuff manner that has wooed everyone from Hollywood actresses to Manhattan restaurant critics and patrons, Batali assesses his strengths as a golfer. "My sense of humor is the strongest part of my game. I have a positive attitude...and a pretty reasonable short game."

It looks like this Iron Chef has picked the right hobby. ■

Amy Levin-Epstein is a freelance writer and devoted foodie, based in Florida.

