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Babbo's Big Boy

JOE 'SUPER MARIO BROTHER'
BASTIANICH DISHES
IT OUT AL DENTE

Despite lawsuits, knife
fights, he won't say 'Ciao,
Manhattan' just yet

By Foster Kamer

Joseph Bastianich isn't content being a mere Restaurant Man, as he'd have it. Or even a haute grocer.

"Hopefully, we're going to change the way people consume," he said, sitting at a table in Eataly, the Flatiron grocery store he opened in August 2010 in a partnership with Mario Batali, his mother, Lidia, and Italian businessman Oscar Farinetti. Before him was a plate of



Bastianich.

lentils and a glass of red wine. Asked about the rising price of food, he quickly fired off his reply in his distinctly outer-borough-bred baritone: "We're going to change the balance of the plate. Less proteins, more carbs, more legumes, more rice, more barley. The era of cheap, abundant food is gone."

He swirled his wine. "This is going to be a great article by the way, if you write it correctly," he said. "The poorest people in the world eat this," he said, tapping his plate with his fork. "And it's delicious."

The night before, Mr. Bastianich was on double-duty at the Fox network upfront party, helping both to cater the massive event and appear as one of the network's stars (he's a judge on *MasterChef*). And a moment after speaking with *The Observer*, he would embark on a rapid-fire wine tasting with an assistant, unleashing a fusillade of instructions at the young woman sitting across from him: "This is great. We could charge another two bucks for this. What else do you have for me?"

Pour, drink, spit.

"Let's pull this one and wait another year."

After that, he'd hop in a yellow cab (he owns the medallion and personally employs the driver) and head to JFK, then fly off to begin shooting the second season of the Italian version of *MasterChef*. Meanwhile, he's somehow managing

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an empire of 18 restaurants—or more, depending on how you count them—scattered from New York to Pittsburgh, to Kansas City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and back, along with three Italian wineries. Then there are his three children, Olivia, Miles and Ethan, with his wife of 17 years, Deanna.

Amid all of that, he's somehow found time to write a memoir.

Restaurant Man was sold to Viking at auction in October 2010 for an advance report-

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ed to be somewhere between \$680,000 and \$710,000, no small take for a book from a guy who—while a veritable kingpin—isn't exactly Molto Mario.

The memoir, which has rightfully earned comparisons to Anthony Bourdain's seminal service industry tell-all *Kitchen Confidential*, is a dinner rush-paced sprint through the last 30 years of the restaurant industry in America. It follows a rise to prominence driven by—among other things—a distinctly Boomer-ish fear of not winding up richer than his parents.

The book is filled with borderline-misanthropic wisdom, offered up in a Scorsese-esque grumble. ("You're just happy to know *what* people are stealing from you," he writes at one point. "After that, it's just how much you're willing to tolerate.") It is often enthralling, as when he extols the virtues of being a "cheap fuck," including which vendors to pay last. And it is unapologetically direct—breaking down immigrant workers' skill sets by national-

ity, for instance, and walking readers through the process of deciding whether to fire a manager.

One critic described it as a “meltdown dressed as a memoir” and compared it to the rantings of a “street corner lunatic.”

“It’s a tough world out there,” Mr. Bastianich said, when it was suggested that his take seemed aggressively cynical. “It’s such a drag-your-knuckle, fuck-me-or-I’ll-fuck-you business, and then, you gotta put on a suit and get in the dining room every night to wine and dine, and see the power brokers of the world.”

During his post-lunch tasting, Bastianich asked the young woman pouring the wines if she’d read it.

“Some of it,” she said.

“Do you think I sound like a cynical lunatic?”

“Not really, but maybe that’s because I know you.”

BASTIANICH WAS BORN in Astoria and raised in Bayside, Queens, where he spent most of his formative years in his parents’ first restaurant, Buonavita, in Forest Hills. As a teenager at Fordham Prep, he watched his parents open Manhattan’s Felidia, as Lidia became a star in the food world (then, still a fairly obscure stripe of celebrity).

After graduating from Boston College in 1989, he did a quick stint on Wall Street as a bond trader. “I was doing capital markets, swaps, govies [government bonds], you know, that kind of stuff,” he explained.

It didn’t work out.

In the book, he describes the experience as being “like *American Psycho* without the chainsaws,” adding, “I didn’t want to be that guy, and I didn’t want to fuck clueless women.”

Leaving the Street with his bonus, he purchased a one-way ticket to Italy, where he bought a used VW Rabbit, embarking on what he calls an “intellectual journey” and “very primal, sensory trip” across Italy, sampling the local foodstuffs, *terroirs* and women. While the younger ones were comparable to the Virgin Mary, he writes, the divorcees were “giving it away.”

Bastianich’s preference for over-salted prose with four-letter words is prevalent; the book

may as well be called *Eat, Fuck, Castigate*. But his thorough understanding and appreciation for all things food—especially native Italian wine and cuisine—is passionate and eloquently conveyed.

On his return to New York, Mr. Bastianich opened up his first restaurant: Becco, in the Theater District, earning decent reviews. Soon, his mother introduced him to Mr. Batali, then the chef of Po. Together they opened Babbo in 1998. The restaurant, which featured an offal-laden menu and a loud rock soundtrack, was a hit,

and a three-star review from Gael Greene at *The New York Times* certified it. Since then, his empire has relentlessly metastasized.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Bastianich has won some detractors along the way, especially in recent years. One big hiccup occurred in November, when Mario Batali compared the evils of investment banking to those of Stalin and Hitler. He apologized, but not before sparking a Wall Street revolt, including a Twitter hashtag (#Bataligate), rumors of investment banks refusing to honor expensed lunches at Batali/Bastianich restaurants, and Bloomberg terminals categorizing all their eateries as “DON’T GO.” Despite his own unpleasant experience in finance, Mr. Bastianich (who raised money for Del Posto in part from “a couple of guys at Goldman”) is still defensive about the episode.

“That was Mario’s thing,” he said. “I really have nothing to do with that.” But isn’t Mr. Batali his business partner? “He’s entitled to his opinion. You know, whatever. Quite honestly, he was misquoted.” Even so, restaurants like Del Posto can’t risk alienating deep-pocketed patrons. Especially given the restaurant’s tumultuous history.

Del Posto was almost closed shortly after opening due to its lease changing hands. The new landlords—described by Mr. Bastianich as “the most unlikable fucking New York douchebag landlords ever” (page 206) and “pure fucking evil” (page 210)—served an eviction notice, claiming the partners had violated the lease agreement with unauthorized construction. Eater claimed it all went back to a pasta dinner the management refused to comp to the new owners.

The ensuing 18-month legal battle included a trip to State Supreme Court. Though he prevailed, Mr. Bastianich is still seething about the fight. In the book, he calls the opposing counsel, Warren Estis, “the fucking antichrist of landlord-tenant lawyers” (page 210), and describes the landlords’ PR advisor, Richard Rubenstein, as “Hermann Göring of publicists” (also: page 210).

Recalling the dispute, Mr. Bastianich’s eyes glazed over, as if he were having a bad flashback. “I was fighting for my very life, for my 15-million-dollar investment,” he said. “We spent well over a million dollars fighting that shit.”

But it was the press war that stung the most. “The fact that you can buy that kind of ink in *The Post* ...” he said, trailing off.

The New York Post did go hard on Del Posto. Food critic Steve Cuozzo slammed the restaurant—in a review that also took on its neighbor Morimoto—under the headline “Bum and Bummer.”

In the book, Mr. Bastianich addresses Mr. Cuozzo directly: “I just want to ask Steve, ‘Are you a real-estate reporter, a restaurant critic, or just plain fucking stupid?’”

Mr. Cuozzo responded in *The Post*, calling Bastianich “dumb” and a “lunatic,” asking if he remembered the episode incorrectly: “Did Mama Lidia beat him with a zabaglione whisk for the mess he made of Del Posto’s launch, when it was nearly evicted for violating its lease?”

He finished with the taunt: “Lidia, talk to your boy before he costs you real money.”

It was far from the only hostile reaction the book earned. In response to a passage about the time when *Esquire*’s food critic John Mariani, a “self-righteous, condescending prick,” berated him and “sliced my balls off tableside” over a bad meal, Mr. Mariani fired back through gossip items. He called Mr. Bastianich’s recollection of events “not just vile but so duplicitous that it’s difficult to imagine you are truly the son of your ever cordial, ever civilized parents.”

Regarding the backlash to the book’s more fiery passages, Mr. Bastianich initially claimed to be taken aback: “Quite frankly, it’s surprising to me,” he said. But then he ad-

‘I was wrong. I spent two years of my life fighting lawsuits when what I should really be doing is opening restaurants.’

mitted, “Oh, Mariani, yeah. I knew he’d freak out. I mean, whatever. It happened, it’s the truth. I don’t hate him.” Still, he said, “I wish they would leave my mom out of it. She is probably a kinder, more gentle person than I am, and she doesn’t deserve to be brought into this.”

Still, those dustups are fingerling potatoes compared to the labor lawsuits that have been filed against the company.

In 2010, a suit was brought alleging labor violations and demanding back pay. The original lawsuit—which started with only two Babbo employees and alleged that a percentage of wine sales was being deducted from the tip pool—was eventually expanded to a class-action suit against eight Batali/Bastianich restaurants in 2011, a few months after Mr. Bastianich called “bullshit” in the press (a line that was quoted in the judge’s decision to expand the suit to a class-action).

Initially, Mr. Bastianich declined to settle, telling Eater that “we’re going to fight this to every inch of the law, because we know we’re right” and later remarking to *The Post* that the suits were the work of “money-hungry lawyers” who were “shaking down the very foundation of Manhattan’s restaurant industry.”

One of the lawyers Mr. Bastianich was no doubt referring to was Maimon Kirschenbaum, who brought the suit against his company, and who has han-

dled numerous such cases, winning more than \$35 million in settlements.

"I don't think it's confidential that that guy doesn't like me," Mr. Kirschenbaum said in a phone call with *The Observer*. "I called him a thief." Mr. Kirschenbaum hasn't read the book, but when told of some of the opening passages, in which Mr. Bastianich explains the various ways in which employees rip off their bosses, he quickly fired back. "I'm of the opposite mind," he said. "Employees have to be incredibly suspicious of restaurateurs, because restaurateurs sort of believe that there are two groups of people. There's the businessman and the employees, and you are the slave. So you should be happy with whatever I give you, and you should not be getting rich in my establishment."

In the book, Mr. Bastianich plays both sides of the net, initially describing professional waiters as "generally overeducated, artistically deprived, bitter people who feel that every dollar they earn is blood money, and they resent being there" (page 95).

He then goes on to praise his own wait staff as "passionate" and "great," explaining that "we create a positive work environment" (page 96).

In March, almost two years after it was filed, the suit was settled for \$5.25 million.

"Yeah, well," Bastianich sighed, "I was wrong. I was wrong in that I didn't have the resources or the time to fight this thing. I spent two years of my life fighting lawsuits when what I should really be doing is opening restaurants."

Still, the concession had to hurt, no?

"Yeah, it hurts," he said. "Five million is a lot of money." At this, he put down his fork: "I can't comment on this a lot because we signed those rights away," he said. "But there is no justice in this, I can tell you that."

Did he learn anything from the experience?

"I learned that I should shut the fuck up. And I learned to eat my words."

On the horizon for Mr. Bastianich is the third season of American *MasterChef*, and the second of the Italian *MasterChef*. Eataly is expanding to Los Angeles and Chicago. Two months ago, Babbo began lunch service. Lupa Osteria Romana recently had one star removed by *The Times*' Eric Asminov, and they'll want it back. Del Posto's challenge is to retain four stars, while keeping the seats filled.

And there might be another New York restaurant on the way. In a heated moment during the labor dispute, Mr. Bastianich told *The Post* he was done opening restaurants here. When asked if this was still the case, he turned to the publicist sitting with us: "Did I say that? Really?" he asked. She nodded.

"Fuck," he said, admitting that a new local spot was "percolating," after all.

He laughed. "I was just in a fit of rage," he said. "Time heals, and life goes on."

fkamer@observer.com