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Food & dining

Batali bursts into town with Babbo

Celebrity chef brings Babbo to Innovation District



By Kara Baskin | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 28, 2015

In the shadows of the Seaport's old Anthony's Pier 4, waiters glide through a sunlit dining room carrying trays of pizza and goblets of wine. In one corner, chef Jasper White sips water; in another, chef Michael Schlow chats up friends. At the center of it all is celebrity chef Mario Batali, toting platters of salami like a giddy uncle.

"Want a bite?" he says with a devilish grin. It's the opening party for his first Boston restaurant, Babbo, and he's ready to cut loose. Batali is the highest-profile chef to open in the new Innovation District, and his arrival seems to cement the neighborhood's transformation from grit to glitz.

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He strides to the front of the room in shorts and a fleece vest, red hair coaxed into a ponytail. “We’re not here to beat anyone. We’re not here to be intimidating. We’re here to be part of your family!” he toasts. Cheers all around.

No ego here, or maybe Batali feels obligated to acknowledge the chatter that has surrounded his arrival. After all, he is famous and prolific. He operates 25 restaurants in New York City and beyond. His original Babbo in Manhattan has a Michelin star, one of the restaurant industry’s top honors. He made his reputation with big, bold interpretations of Italian food. The original Babbo is known for beef cheek ravioli and warm lamb’s tongue vinaigrette.

Then there’s that big, bold personality. He’s a happy culinary warrior in a uniform straight out of L.L. Bean: part celebrity, part CEO, part class clown. There are TV appearances on “Iron Chef,” “The Chew,” and “Spain: On the Road Again,” where he appeared alongside Gwyneth Paltrow. Yet he’s not above swapping cooking tips or sparring with fans on social media. He’s also philanthropic. His Mario Batali Foundation raises funds for hunger relief and children’s disease research. The 54-year-old father of two signs his charitable endeavors with a note: “love and linguine.”

As such, the New York chef’s Boston plans were chronicled for years. Batali and his B&B Hospitality Group business partner, Joe Bastianich, first moved to open an affordable, pizza-focused Fort Point restaurant in 2012. Venting issues scuttled those plans, and fans mourned. Last year, he inked a deal with developer Joseph F. Fallon to bring Babbo to Fan Pier. The restaurant is on the ground floor of Eleven Fan Pier Boulevard, a gleaming office tower that houses Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc. Every Boston-oriented tweet from Batali — he’s an avid tweeter — sent industry-watchers into paroxysms of speculation. Is it ready yet? Will it be any good?

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Fallon thinks so. The Batali brand is a sound investment for Boston, he says, noting that Babbo provides good food with mass appeal. Fallon admits that he snuck into various Batali restaurants during the deal-making phase to vet the food before committing.

The restaurant is steps from another Italian restaurant in a Fallon space, Strega Waterfront. It's helmed by Nick Varano, a Boston restaurateur also known for a gregarious personality. Fallon thinks the two establishments are different enough to thrive. Strega offers dishes like \$54 filet mignon and \$49 veal chops. The Boston version of Babbo specializes in antipasti, wood-oven pizza, and pasta. Most dishes are under \$20. "These prices are built to move," Batali says in his toast.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Grilled mozzarella sandwiches.

His arrival bolsters the city's profile as a destination for entrepreneurial chefs. In recent years, New York restaurateur Danny Meyer opened several Shake Shack burger restaurants throughout the area. In 2014, Daniel Boulud, a globally respected chef, debuted Bar Boulud at the Back Bay's Mandarin Oriental hotel. Batali will launch a 42,000-square-foot branch of Eataly food market at the Prudential Center in September 2016.

It's a switch. Enterprising local chefs typically pilgrimage to New York and beyond: Todd English. Ken Oringer. Michael Schlow. Now, there's a sense that it's Boston's turn to shine. "The food scene has become such that these people are actually wanting to cook here from all over the world," says Oringer, who operates restaurants in Boston and New York.

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Batali seems eager to fit in. “I love this town!” he cries between toasts. “I’m bullish on Boston!” He later mentions that he wouldn’t mind an apartment by the water.

The softer-spoken Bastianich attended Boston College and fondly remembers eating at places like Anthony’s Pier 4 and No Name with his classmates. Business plans don’t hinge on nostalgia, though, and Bastianich says that Boston was a logical expansion. “It’s a major Northeastern seaboard city where there’s enough money and enthusiasm and culture to support a restaurant like this,” Bastianich says.

Recently, Batali had beer and oysters at nearby restaurant Row 34, which he loved. The neighborhood’s energy also amazed him. “At 11:45 on a Friday night, construction was cranking on two buildings here. It’s like New York. Nowhere else in the world are they building stuff at 11:45 on a Friday night. They’re building it here. It’s vibrant, exciting, and it’s on the water,” he says.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Mushroom and smoked mozzarella pizza.

Exciting enough for more Batali ventures? His eyes twinkle. “We’re always hatching plans, but I can’t tell you any of them!” he cackles. “If you talk about the lease before you sign the lease, you never get the lease.”

There are hints that Boston might get more Batali, though. Maybe it’s just his trademark enthusiasm, but he seems enchanted. “Boston is a sporting, artistic, energetic, wild place. Our challenge is to make sure Bostonians understand we want to be in their family. We’re not here to show them the Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich way. We’re here to share with them the experience and be a part of their lives,” Batali says.

Part of that is respecting history. After all, a generation ago, families flocked around the corner to Anthony’s Pier 4 to celebrate special occasions and milestones, and not everyone is swept up in the excitement of new construction and brand-name dining. “If we could capture half the vibe of [Anthony’s], that would be great,” Batali says. “But it was kind of a tuxedo-y place, right? The world has changed since those times. You no longer have to put on a jacket and a tie to even go to the fancy places.”

Now, you can get \$9 pizza and \$3 beer from a famous chef who wears shorts and clogs. On a recent weekend, the dining room clatters with midday activity. Several customers approach Batali for photos, and he gamely poses. “Is this the place? It must be the place,” a couple says as they approach the entrance. They’re clearly here for a special day out. These buildings might be new, but the atmosphere isn’t.

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The atmosphere at Babbo is casual and family-friendly.