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Editor's Note:

Senior Editor Bill Glovin, who had written profiles of celebrity chef Mario Batali and rock deejay Matt Pinfield for *Rutgers Magazine*, recently introduced the two Rutgers men to each other over lunch at one of Batali's New York City restaurants. The two men had much more in common than they could have imagined.

A Web Exclusive: Mutual Admiration Society

Celebrity chef Mario Batali and rock 'n' roll disc jockey Matt Pinfield attended Rutgers in the early 1980s, though they didn't know each other at the time. But each has observed, and respected, the talents and career of the other. Finally, thanks to senior editor Bill Glovin, the two men finally met over lunch to discuss food, music, and Rutgers.

As assignments go, it was pretty plum: I was asked to interview rising celebrity chef Mario Batali RC'82 at Babbo, his Greenwich Village restaurant that had won universal praise for its innovative use of fresh ingredients. Back then, in May 2001, Babbo was three years old and Batali had grown bored with the idea of regurgitating his career in yet another interview. Instead, he spent 45 minutes recalling all the great music he had heard while a student on the Rutgers–New Brunswick Campus in the late 1970s and early '80s. He talked about camping out all night for tickets at the Rutgers Student Center to see the Grateful Dead and the Kinks, road trips to the Capitol Theater in Passaic to see such bands as the Rolling Stones, and the evolving red-hot local music scene in New Brunswick. Once he was finished, he proudly pointed out that he personally selected the playlist heard every night in Babbo. Eventually, we got around to talking food, and I even got to spend a few minutes watching the frenetic action in Babbo's kitchen. But clearly, here was a bon vivant who was as passionate about music as he was about food, wine, and creating an atmosphere where people could enjoy both to the max.

Last spring, Batali's passion for music and the great concert memories he had as a Rutgers student came up during my interview with Matt Pinfield, the popular morning drive-time disc jockey on 101.9 WRXP and a former MTV video disc jockey. As a Rutgers student and for two years afterwards, Pinfield had been active in the New Brunswick music scene, serving as a disc jockey and program director at WRSU-FM, spinning records several nights a week at The Melody nightclub, and interviewing such luminaries as Bob Weir, Billy Idol, and Henry Rollins in the WRSU studio.

Lunch at Otto Enoteca Pizzeria

Pinfield didn't know Batali in college but knew he was an alumnus and had closely followed his career. When Pinfield said that he would be thrilled to meet Batali, I offered to set up a meeting. Batali immediately responded with the news that he, in turn, had followed Pinfield's career, and suggested lunch at one of his restaurants, Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, modeled after an Italian train station and a few blocks from his Greenwich Village residence. Joining us would be Leslie Fram, Pinfield's partner on RXP's morning drive-time show and the station's program director.

The fact that it was December didn't deter Batali from wearing his signature short pants. The chef and the disc jockey quickly bonded like two old friends, reminiscing about their escapades at Rutgers and in the New York City music scene. They talked about their favorite performers and concerts, their families, and the path they took to get to the top of their professions. They shared small details from their college years: Batali had first lived at the river dorm, Campbell 614, before moving to 243 Hamilton Street. Pinfield resided at 51 Mine Street in New Brunswick before moving to South First Avenue in Highland Park.

It was too early for wine, so we all sipped Diet Cokes and left the ordering to Batali, who started us with spicy broccoli rabe with ricotta salata; rock shrimp with snow peas, two concoctions with parsley root, fresh prosciutto, and two types of salad. The entrees included *tacozette con stracotto*, linguini with pesto, and two thin-crust pizzas; desserts—or *dolci* as they refer to it on the menu—consisted of warm apple cranberry crisp, olive oil *coppetta*, and a sampling of gelati and sorbetti. I thought of my Food Network-addicted mother-in-law, who would have summed up the meal with an, "It was absolutely to die for!"

Fram and I listened intently, occasionally making our presence felt by asking someone to pass over yet another marvelous creation being marched out of the kitchen by a team of waiters. Why interrupt these two Rutgers soulmates as they explained to each other the enormous passion they feel for their work, passion that has brought them fame and provided opportunity and extraordinary access? But there was no attempt to boast or top one story with a better



Celebrity chef Mario Batali, who has a stake in 15 restaurants in New York City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, got his start at Stuff Yer Face in New Brunswick. *Photography by Melanie Dunea*



Matt Pinfield (left) onstage with Steven Van Zandt, of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, one of the many rock 'n' roll celebrities whom he has befriended during his career. *Photography courtesy of Getty Images*

one, and this leisurely lunch had become the perfect atmosphere to cover topics ranging from world peace to the fat sandwiches served by the grease trucks at Rutgers. "A great alternative was White Rose in Highland Park," Pinfield told Batali. "The ex-cons who worked there made magical burgers." Batali responded with: "Some nights, we opted for Greasy Tony's, but the next morning could be very rough, indeed."

The Big Start at Stuff Yer Face

Batali talked about getting his first job in the food business as "the second-fastest line cook" at Stuff Yer Face, the stromboli restaurant on Easton Avenue in New Brunswick. Batali revealed that he had so strongly believed in the stromboli's potential that he took a \$500 Rutgers graduation gift received from his parents and bought stock in the place, predicting inevitable expansion and a massive return on investment. "At one point, they merged with Tubby [Grilled] Subs," Batali cracked. "What were they thinking?"

The conversation bounced between music and food. Batali, who had once played trombone and then bass in a Kiss tribute band, estimated that he had attended 150 Grateful Dead concerts while attending Rutgers. He said that while his website (mariobatali.com) focuses mainly on food and wine, his 15 restaurants, and traveling in Italy, it also includes his personal musical recommendations. The previous evening, he had been out till 3:30 a.m. with R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe, "seeing this sexy Latin vocalist, Rene Lopez, somewhere on Avenue B in the East Village, a much improved area," he said.

Pinfield responded by pointing out that waking up at 4 a.m. weekdays to travel from his house in Harrison, New Jersey, to the RXP studios on Hudson Street made it hard for him and Fram to catch shows during the week—one of the frustrating parts of his job. He talked about singing with a band as a teenager and his own early musical influences: Queen and David Bowie. Both learned that they had probably attended the same concerts: maybe one of the Clash shows at Bonds in 1981 or a recent Raconteurs concert at Terminal 5. They agreed that the Kinks are among the most underappreciated bands in rock 'n' roll history and that leader Ray Davies—touring at the time with a choir—is a songwriting genius.

At one point, focusing on diet and nutrition, the conversation segued to the idea that health trumps all. I pointed out that Batali had once suffered a brain aneurism. Pinfield reacted by telling us that, coincidentally, he too had suffered the same malady at age 15—a life-changing event he had forgot to mention to me only months before. Pinfield talked of the surgery to relieve the pressure on his brain at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Brunswick, and the havoc it created on his appearance. "The chances that two people would be sitting at the same table who survived aneurisms is probably about 1 in 10,000," said Batali, who suffered his aneurism at age 39. "I thought I had a bad headache and went to a pharmacist, who suggested I take two aspirin and go to bed," he recalled. "If I had listened, I'd be dead. Two days later, I had eight hours of surgery." Both agreed that the experience of surviving aneurisms had, in part, taught them to not sweat the small stuff.

Pinfield Starts Spinning Records

Pinfield had grown up near the New Brunswick Campus as the son of a science teacher at East Brunswick High School. He played disc jockey with his friends and got himself a gig in high school on WRSU by contributing to a pledge drive. Batali was raised in Washington State and attended high school in Spain because his father worked for Boeing. Rutgers appealed to him because his older brother was at nearby Princeton.

Batali's grandparents, parents, and aunts and uncles all contributed to making food a central theme in his life. In fact, after retiring from Boeing, his father opened a tiny luncheonette in Pioneer Square in Seattle, where "it's really tough to get a seat. Let me know if you're in Seattle and I'll call my sister and make it happen," offered Batali. When Pinfield related that after his father passed away and his mother had relocated to Clearwater, Florida, Batali told him that he had once worked at the city's Holiday Inn. They spent the next five minutes extolling the virtues of Clearwater, including a local favorite: grouper sandwiches.

When I first met Batali in the spring of 2001, he had a stake in three restaurants in New York City. Now, there are 15. With so many restaurants and 2,000 employees to manage, the chef must feel more like a businessman than a creator of fine cuisine. Despite traveling to his two restaurants in Los Angeles and three restaurants in Las Vegas each month, he still has the freedom to explore. "If I want to go taste olives for three days, I still do it," he said. "And it seems like every other month, someone's flying me to Italy to give a talk—which isn't too shabby."

Batali, whose shorts and red hair pulled back into a ponytail make him easy to spot, was delighted when a group of people approached the table to acknowledge Pinfield. "Thank you for bringing so much good music to the mornings," one fan said. A few minutes later, a boy approached Batali with pen in hand, asking if he would autograph a take-out menu. Later, his mother thanked Batali for signing it and told them how much their party had enjoyed Otto.

Wild and Crazy Guys—and Fathers!

Batali and Pinfield are fathers, and they talked of what they've learned from their kids (Batali has two sons, ages 11 and 13, and Pinfield, two daughters, ages 9 and 23). "Duty calls," said Batali, with 3 p.m. fast approaching. He excused himself to pick up his boys at school. Before departing, Pinfield and Fram invited him to play disc jockey with them on the air. Batali, with a huge grin, accepted the invitation on the spot. In the two-plus hours of dining and conversation, neither man had checked his BlackBerry a single time—which had to be some kind of record.

On my way out the door, I tried not to think about the number of calories I had just consumed. Unfortunately, swimming back to New Jersey wasn't an option. The next day, I received an email from Fram saying she and Pinfield thought so much of Otto that the station planned to hold their holiday party there. Pinfield also sent me a note to thank me for playing matchmaker, but all that came to mind as I headed to the gym was that old saying: The pleasure was all mine.

— Bill Glovin