

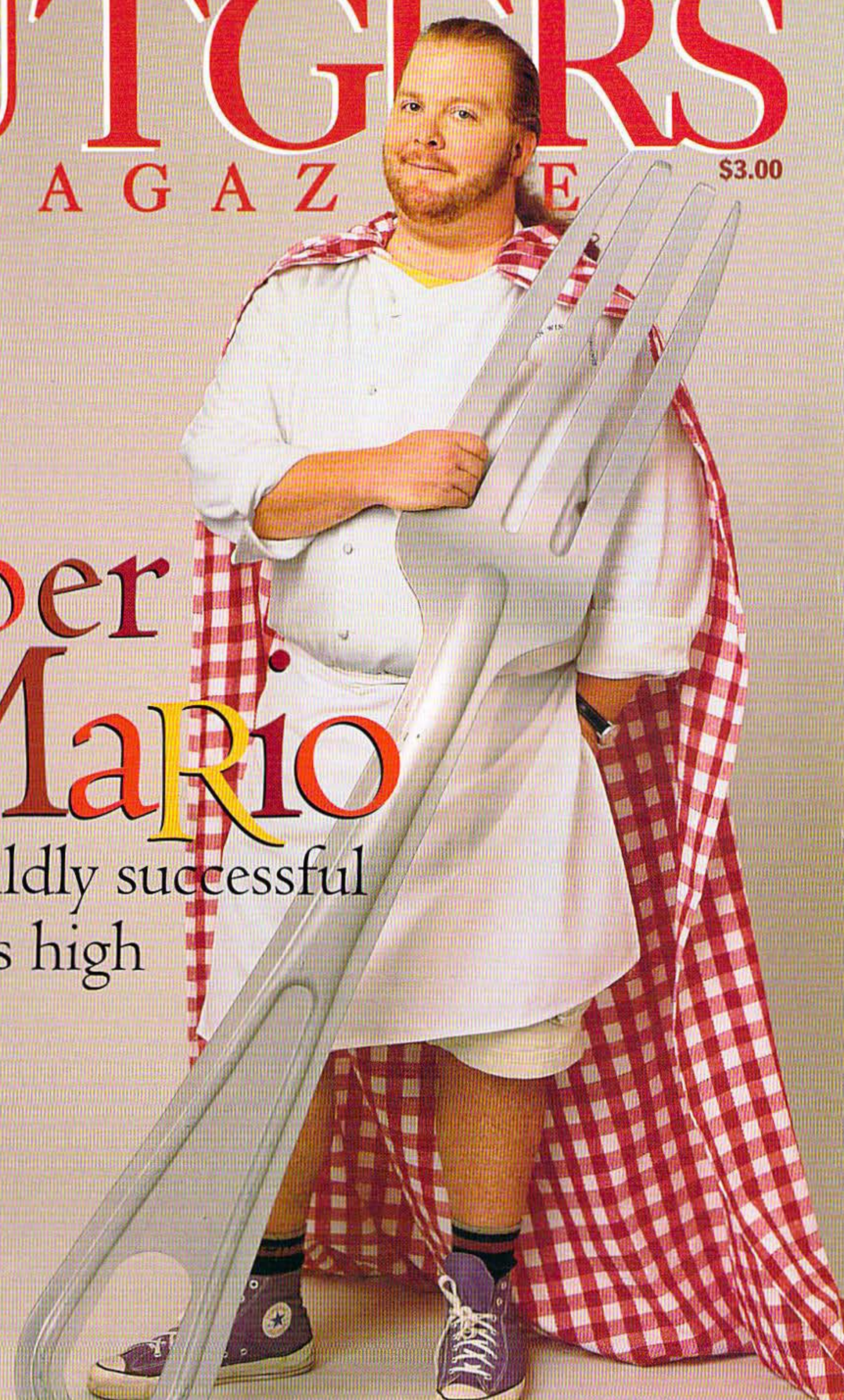
FOR ALUMNI & FRIENDS OF NEW JERSEY'S STATE UNIVERSITY

SUMMER 2001

RUTGERS

M A G A Z I N E

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Super Mario

A wildly successful
chef flies high

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the maitre d' walks into the bustling kitchen at Babbo and hands Mario Batali a note. An old classmate is waiting at the bar to say hello. "Wow, I haven't seen her since college," says Batali. "I'll be out soon." It will be about a half-hour before Batali gets a chance to visit with Eileen Golden (RC'82). The executive chef has carved out this part of the evening to watch his chefs work on such dishes as beef-cheek ravioli with crushed squab liver and beef short rib with pumpkin polenta.

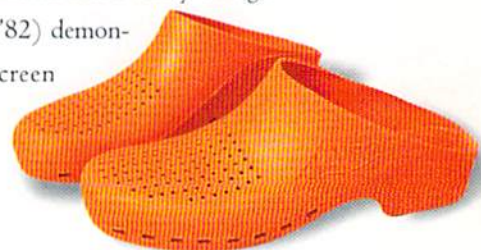
With his signature look—red ponytail, white shorts, and high-top sneakers or clogs—the 41-year-old celebrity chef, more commonly known as *Molto Mario*, the name of his television show, was easily recognizable among a cluster of people at the bar. "I first got into the habit of wearing shorts at Rutgers," says Batali, who, a few minutes later, is back in the kitchen adjusting a garnish on the quail. "Dining should be a comfortable experience, and I want people to feel that way. Our only dress code is no tank tops for men."

In Babbo's incredibly cramped kitchen there's barely enough floor space left for the boss. Batali (RC'82) demonstrates how waiters use touch-screen monitors in the dining area to communicate orders to the kitchen. Evidence that the technology

On his way to becoming one of the best-known chefs in the world, Mario Batali learned some important lessons at his alma mater.

by Bill Glovin

Photographs by Deborah Feingold





works is that waiters waste little time in the kitchen picking up shiny, oversized white plates that flatter gastronomic fare resembling miniature still-life paintings. "When a line cook says something will be ready in one minute, he can't mean three," says

Batali. "Chefs can't be bumping into one another; nonverbal communication is essential. A kitchen needs to run like a finely tuned machine."

Among the chief reasons why Batali's kitchens are consistently busy and people wait a month or

more for a reservation are rave reviews, cutting-edge cuisine, and prices that won't max out your credit card. In *New York* magazine's "Best of New York" feature in April, separate critics cited Babbo and Lupa—two of his three restaurants—as the two best Italian eateries in the city. One

critic even gushed, "Mario Batali is the Thomas Edison of pasta and peppers."

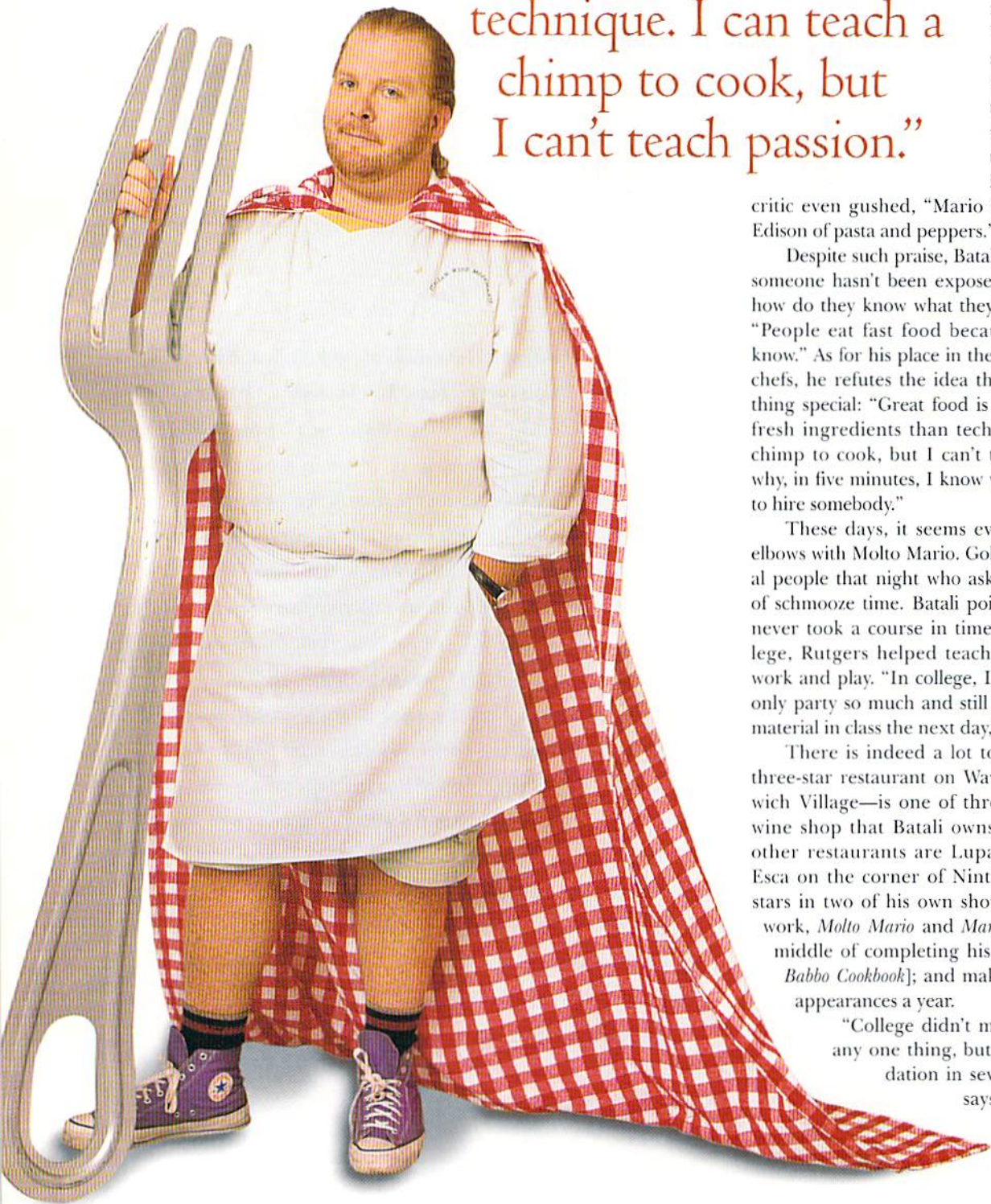
Despite such praise, Batali seems grounded. "If someone hasn't been exposed to great food, then how do they know what they're missing?" he asks. "People eat fast food because that's what they know." As for his place in the modern pantheon of chefs, he refutes the idea that his talent is something special: "Great food is more about knowing fresh ingredients than technique. I can teach a chimp to cook, but I can't teach passion. That's why, in five minutes, I know whether or not I want to hire somebody."

These days, it seems everyone wants to rub elbows with Molto Mario. Golden was one of several people that night who asked for a few minutes of schmooze time. Batali points out that while he never took a course in time management in college, Rutgers helped teach him about juggling work and play. "In college, I learned that you can only party so much and still be able to absorb the material in class the next day," he says.

There is indeed a lot to juggle. Babbo—the three-star restaurant on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village—is one of three restaurants and a wine shop that Batali owns with partners. The other restaurants are Lupa on Thompson and Esca on the corner of Ninth and 43rd. He also stars in two of his own shows on the Food Network, *Molto Mario* and *Mario Eats Italy*; is in the middle of completing his third cookbook [*The Babbo Cookbook*]; and makes about 25 personal appearances a year.

"College didn't make me an expert in any one thing, but gave me some foundation in several things I do," he says. "Courses in finance

"Great food is more about knowing fresh ingredients than technique. I can teach a chimp to cook, but I can't teach passion."





gave me the confidence to think I could run a business; psychology and sociology taught me how people may think and act; and theater, language, literature, and political science provided a sense of other cultures and improved my communication skills. Most importantly, college encouraged me to think. I firmly believe that a liberal arts education should be required before anyone takes up a trade."

When Batali's not being pulled in a half-dozen directions, he's making plans to expand his reach. He hopes to open new restaurants in vibrant, but less trendy, neighborhoods, so that he can expose young people to his culinary style. He also plans to launch Italian ice cream shops and find a farm in Italy to convert into a winery, where he will also make cheese, honey, and olive oil. "The more you achieve, the more demands are put on your time," says Batali. "For the past two weeks, I've been taping TV from 7 in the morning to 2, getting to the restaurant at 3, and working until 1 a.m. Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining, because in many respects I can now do whatever the hell I want. But a 70-hour work week isn't unusual."

His schedule, he says, is consistent with his workaholic nature. Still, he's conscious not to lose sight of family, which has always been an integral part of his life. He's still close to his parents and two younger siblings, Dana and Gina, and is careful to build time into his schedule for his wife, Susi, and their two young boys, Benno and Leo. "I get the boys up at 6:30 a.m. on weekdays; we play, I make them breakfast, and take them to school," says Batali, who lives in the Village. "When Susi and I have one of those rare nights of no plans, we take in a movie." He grumbles about having recently seen *Blow*. "Unfortunately, my wife picks films based mainly on the time they start."

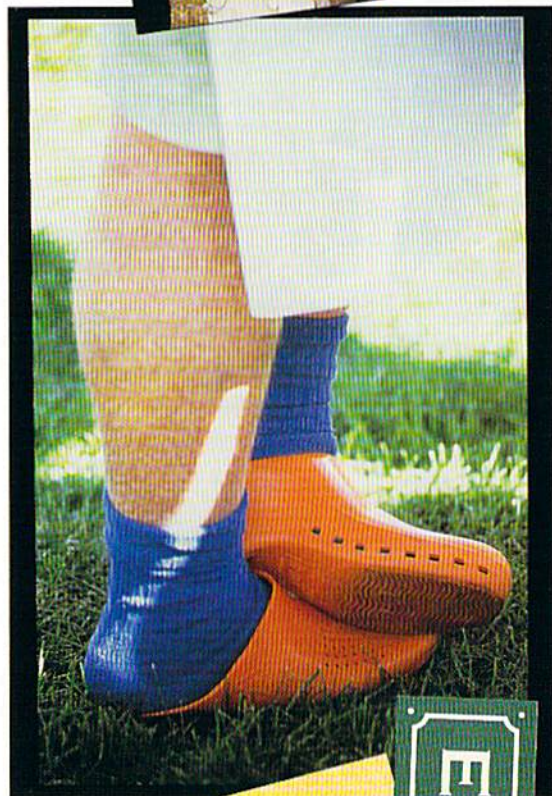
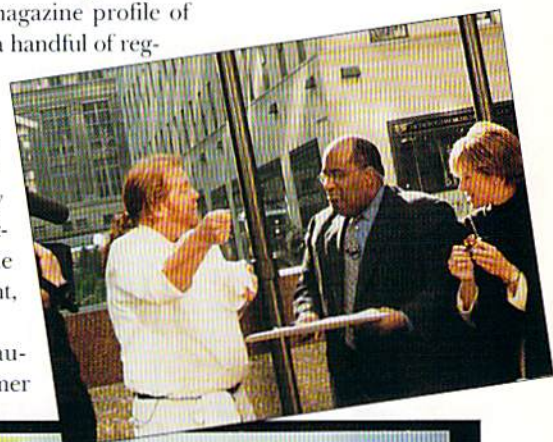
Meeting his wife, Susi Cahn, was a major turning point in his life. In 1992, he was sitting at the bar at Nosmo King in Tribeca when she came in to drop off goat cheese made on her family's Hudson Valley farm. Within the month, she came to dinner at Rocco, a restaurant he helped run at the time. It just so happened that his parents were there that night. After closing, someone brought out an accordion, and Batali's father, Armandino, began to play. Before long, everyone was singing along and Batali and Cahn were making plans for a date. Marriage followed in November 1994.

Says Batali, "When we were dating, things weren't working out at Rocco, and I contemplated moving to Seattle. But Susi encouraged me to stay in New York and see what we could do. Isn't it funny how fate changes everything?"

Since 1979, Stuff Yer Face has been a fixture on the fringes of the College Avenue campus. Mounted on the wall behind the cash register is a framed *People* magazine profile of Batali, but only a handful of regulars and employees know why. "My first job in a restaurant was washing dishes at Stuff Yer Face," says Batali. "I eventually became the fastest line cook." Seconds later, his conscience gets the better of him: "On second thought, Mitchell Ostrander was faster."

Bill Washawanny, the restaurant's owner, remembers his former employee as more inquisitive and confident than most trainees. He points out a staircase wall with snapshots of more than 50 former staffers. There, in the corner of a frame, is a snapshot of a thin, red-haired kid in a faded T-shirt and cap. A caption reads "Mario, '81." "A few years ago we visited one of Mario's restaurants and brought him our specialty, a stromboli," recalls Washawanny. "Someone brought it back to the kitchen and we could hear Mario howling with laughter through the door."

Batali learned an important lesson at Stuff Yer Face. "It was there that I first got a sense of what it takes to run a restaurant," he says. "I had so much fun in those days that work hardly felt like work. I took courses just because they sounded interesting, and constantly met pretty women and made new friends." His pals included former Ryan's bartender James Gandolfini (better known today as Tony Soprano), whom he still occasionally sees. One former classmate, Arturo Sighinolfi (RC'81), was one



From top: Mario gets up early to chat with Al Roker and Katie Couric on the Today show; those famous clogs; cards from his three restaurants.





of his partners at Rocco. Another, Glenn Lauritsen (RC'82), renovated Pó and Babbo, which was formerly known as The Carriage House.

Batali came to Rutgers after growing up in the Pacific Northwest and attending a prep school in Spain. The family moved to Madrid in March 1975, when Armandino, an engineer for Boeing, was trans-

Already somewhat fluent in Spanish, Batali double majored in Spanish theater and economics. He clearly recalls two professors: "Edward Nagy inflamed me with the spirit of Spanish language and literature. J.J. Seneca's economics class was packed with 140 students, but it felt like he was talking right to you. Up until this past U.S. presidential election, when I felt like Gore desperately needed me, I have written in J.J. Seneca's name every four years. I still feel he would do a great job." [Seneca is now university vice president for academic affairs.]

Batali also credits Rutgers with exposing him to great music. In Seattle, he had learned to play trombone, switched to guitar and, at Rutgers, often jammed

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ferred. Most of Batali's classmates applied to Ivy League schools, but there was something about Rutgers that appealed to him. "I wanted tradition and something close to, but not in, New York—New York scared me," he says. "I was also strangely attracted to a school that had a basketball player named 'Jammin James' [Bailey, LC'79]." Between his sophomore and senior years, Batali saw a lot of his brother Dana, who was a year behind him at Princeton.

"Within 24 hours of landing on campus in 1978, I knew I had picked the right school," he says. Clearing away the cobwebs of time, he goes on: "I lived in the River dorms, Campbell 614, which felt like a luxury apartment. From the top floor, we had a great view of the river. In my sophomore year, I was asked to vacate over a misinterpretation over a small stash of marijuana. I moved to houses on Mine and Hamilton streets so I'd still be on campus."

late into the night before hitting the grease trucks or Greasy Tony's. When he's told that a large, mixed-use building replaced Greasy Tony's on the corner of Somerset and Easton avenues in 1994, the look on his face suggests personal disappointment over the loss of a sentimental landmark. "There was no charge for extra grease, but the next morning was rough," he recalls, laughing. "We used to camp out for hours on end to buy concert tickets. I must have seen The Kinks about eight times on campus; my home away from home was the Capitol Theater in Passaic. I once saw The Rolling Stones there from the third row. I take great pride in the music we play at Babbo; I handle the playlist."

His mother, Marilyn, recalls that on her son's occasional trips home from Rutgers, he tried to turn family members on to groups like The Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin: "One time, we were visiting family in Yakima [Washington], a conservative town, and Mario was making the rounds in purple jeans and a purple backpack. I heard through the grapevine that people were asking what planet he was from."

Food had always been an important part of Batali's heritage. Marilyn proudly points out that in 1903, her son's paternal grandfather had opened the first Italian import store in Seattle. In his book, *Mario Batali Holiday Food* (Clarkson Potter, 2000), Batali writes about spe-



cial holiday meals that his family mapped out a month in advance. "No one in my family worked professionally as a cook, but it seemed like everyone—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, my parents—had what I'd call an intensely heavy food awareness," says Batali.

Today, his father is retired from Boeing but owns and operates Salumi, a tiny luncheonette in Pioneer Square in Seattle. The focus is as much on curing salami and prosciutto and sausage-making as it is on dining, and customers are invited to help participate in the process. "My dad opens for dinner once a week, and you need to book a year in advance," says the son, proudly.

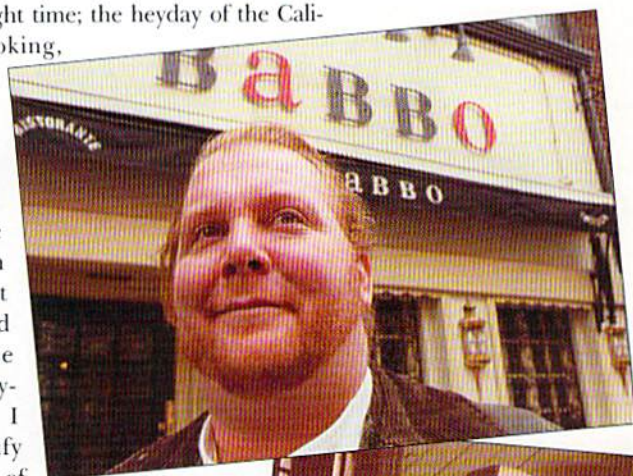
While many of Batali's friends headed for graduate school after Rutgers, he wanted to become a chef and someday open a restaurant. He enrolled at the renowned Cordon Bleu School in London and found work in the kitchen of an upscale pub. Four months later—frustrated by the pace—he dropped out of school but continued to work at the pub for another four months. The head of the kitchen at the time was an unknown, Marco Pierre White, now one of the most influential chefs in Europe. Batali's decision to continue to apprentice under White was a sign that he already had a keen ability to sense culinary talent and learn from it.

In 1984, Batali relocated to San Francisco to

work as a sous-chef at the Four Seasons Hotel. He was there at the right time; the heyday of the California style of cooking,

which focused on seasonal freshness, lightness, and flavor. Four years later he moved on to the Four Seasons in Santa Barbara, but he soon decided that hotel cuisine wasn't for him anymore. "I felt like I needed to intensify my understanding of Italian cooking," he recalls. "My dad knew the restaurant scene in Italy from his travels, so I wrote to all the restaurant owners, asking for a job."

The only response came from a family-run trattoria in the mountain town of Borgo Capanne, between Florence and



When not traveling or taping TV shows, Mario is often found at Babbo (top), a long way from his first restaurant job at Stuff Yer Face in 1981.



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ANTIPASTI SPIEDINI OF SEA SCALLOPS WITH MARINATED ONIONS, LEMON, AND BABY SPINACH

SERVES 4

The trick to buying scallops is to make sure they are hand harvested and have not been treated with tripolyphosphate, a preservative used to extend their freshness that causes them to swell with water and become flaccid and heinous.

- 1 large red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 large lemons, halved lengthwise, seeded, and sliced into 1/4-inch-thick half-moons
- 2 cups plus 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup salt
- 16 large sea scallops, about 1 1/2 pounds
- salt and pepper
- 2 cups baby spinach leaves, rinsed and spun dry
- 10 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1. Preheat the grill or broiler. Soak 4 bamboo skewers in water.
2. In a large mixing bowl, stir together the onion, lemons, 2 cups vinegar, the water, sugar, and salt until well mixed and let stand one hour.
3. On each of the skewers, thread 4 scallops alternately with the marinated lemon pieces, beginning and ending with lemon pieces. Season with salt and pepper and grill until just cooked through, about 4 minutes per side.
4. While the scallops cook, toss the baby spinach in a mixing bowl with 6 tablespoons of the olive oil and the remaining 2 tablespoons vinegar and mix until evenly coated. Divide the spinach among 4 plates.
5. Strain the onions and place in 4 small piles around the rim of each plate. Place a scallop skewer on the spinach. Drizzle each with 1 tablespoon of the remaining olive oil and serve.

From Mario Batali Simple Italian Food by Mario Batali, copyright 1998 by Mario Batali. Photographs copyright by Mark Ferri. Used by permission of Clarkson Potter/Publishers, a division of Random House, Inc.



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Bologna. Thinking he'd stay six months, Batali ended up living there for three years, some of the time without a salary. Italy confirmed for him that using fresh ingredients during their growing seasons was vital to a dish's flavor and appeal. Occasionally, he played his guitar in a nearby bistro or cafe to earn a few lira. "I learned that the true basis of Italian cooking is poverty," he says. "Those who can't afford much use ingredients wisely and don't waste something as precious as pig lips."

Eager to make his mark, Batali returned to New York in 1989 to revamp the menu at Rocco on Thompson Street. "Rocco had a local following, but when Batali came in, everything changed," says David Pinzolo, an independent wine broker. "Not only was the food flavorful and gutsy, but he was someone who worked both sides of the house—the kitchen and customers—with equal aplomb. Many of the top chefs consider mingling with the customers to be an intrusion; Mario excels at it."

When Batali's relationship with his father-and-son partners at Rocco turned sour, he borrowed from three investors to open a new restaurant around the corner. P6, a tiny trattoria with just 34 seats, was an instant success and put Batali on a fast track. At a Meals on Wheels charity event in the fall of 1994, Batali met Jonathan Lynne, who, at the time, was director of programming at the Food Network. Six weeks later Batali was taping *Molto Mario*. "As much as I didn't see it as being crucial at the time, it was a tremendous opportunity to increase my brand and expose people to my love for Italian food and culture." *Molto Mario* led to a second show, *Mario Eats Italy*, shot on location, which debuted this past January.

Soon afterward, he met Lydia Bastianich, who stars in her own Italian cooking show on PBS and whose family owns such well-known establishments as Felidia and Becco in New York. Lydia introduced Batali to her son, Joseph. Together with Joseph and a third party in each venture, Batali owns a share in three restaurants and the Italian Merchants Wine Shop. While he sold his interest in P6 last year, his businesses employ about 350 people and

grossed more than \$15 million in 2000.

Batali's restaurants are where Bill Clinton and Bob Kerry can be overheard cracking off-color jokes, Howard Stern brings his friends, and Tiger Woods goes for a quiet dinner. In Babbo's unfinished basement, Batali and his assistant, Laurie Woolever, review special requests for tables. Most come from celebrities or peo-

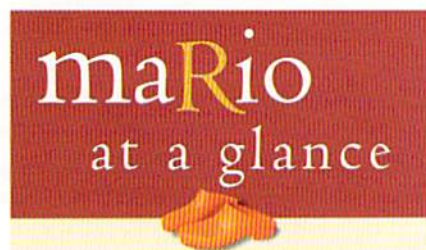
with his own celebrity. By now, almost every national publication has profiled him or reviewed his restaurants. He's also a familiar guest on talk shows such as *Good Morning America* and *Today*. In 1999, *GQ* named him Chef of the Year. "At the *GQ* dinner, I found myself seated next to Dustin Hoffman, thinking, 'holy shit,'" he says. "Sometimes I really have to pinch myself."

The fact that he's often measured against Emeril Lagasse, the star of *Emeril Live* on the Food Network, doesn't bother him. Typical was a *Time* profile comparing him to Lagasse: "They say that success comes at a price...and for Mario Batali the price is that he is always the other great American chef." "By the time I got to the Food Network, Emeril already had two shows," says Batali. "Our styles are certainly different, but I'm for anybody who turns people on to food."

Jockeying for position doesn't much concern Batali; a brain aneurism in 1999 taught him not to sweat the small stuff. "I was at Lupa on a Friday night," he recalls. "Suddenly, voices [of people standing next to me] seemed to be coming from down a long hallway. I went to a pharmacy, where they suggested I take some aspirin and go to bed." Fortunately, Batali didn't listen. An anticoagulant, aspirin could have killed him. Instead he found his way to the emergency room. "Two days later I had eight hours of surgery," he says.

Batali shrugs off the episode as part of life, but Woolever reveals just how serious it was. "Only 50 percent survive that type of surgery," she says, "and more than half end up disabled in some way. The fact that Mario completely recovered in less than a month was nothing short of miraculous." Batali, with a mischievous smile, jokes that some of his closest friends think he's never fully recovered. Then, with his eyes fixed on a sauce pan, he philosophizes: "I love life and have always maintained that life smiles on those who smile on life, so I was pretty confident that I'd be okay. Believe it or not, both my problem and skill may be that I'm happy wherever I am." □

Senior Editor Bill Glovin now has a serious craving for beef-cheek ravioli.



Favorite book: A tie between

The Tin Drum by Günter Grass, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, and *Don*

Quixote by Cervantes

TV show: *The Sopranos*

Film: *The Tin Drum*

Tomato sauce in a jar: "All of them are inconsistent. Sometimes they're really good. Other times, they taste like salted bathwater."

Singer: Tom Waits

Band: R.E.M.

Car: '61 Impala

Sport to watch:

Golf

Sport to play:

Squash

Cuisine other

than Italian:

Southeast Asian

Meal: "Anything anybody else makes."



ple who claim to be connected to one. A request from Chris Katan comes in, but the name is unfamiliar to them. Only after they're told that he's part of the *Saturday Night Live* ensemble do they grant his request for a Friday night table.

Batali is still learning to come to grips