



that Bastianich works with a pair of celebrity chef partners — his mother, Lidia, who does a PBS show from her home kitchen in Queens; and Mario Batali, one of the Food Network's Iron Chefs. But Bastianich deserves credit, too, even if he often doesn't get it. After all, he's the guy in charge outside the kitchens, the owner of a growing restaurant empire that's adding three more locations next year, including eateries in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, with the possibility of growing even more quickly after that.

Which makes you wonder: What does Joe Bastianich know that Rocco and the other "90 percent" — or whatever — don't? The answer: Six things.

THING NO. 1: Listening to your mama is overrated.

If Lidia Bastianich had her way, Joe Bastianich would be hearing legal arguments or cutting into someone's cranium. He'd be Judge Joe. Or Dr. Joe. But he would not be, like his parents before him, a restaurant owner. "I told my kids, 'Restaurants are not what you want to do,'" Lidia says, raising her voice over the clanking dinner plates. She's at Felidia, a New York eatery that she opened in 1981, which remains one of the most bustling and respected Italian restaurants in Manhattan.

Lidia still remembers the days when Joe, at the early age of five, would pull up crates so he could reach the sink and help wash dishes. That was in her first restaur-

Writing the Recipe for Success

You know the Food Network's Mario Batali. You know PBS's Lidia Matticcho Bastianich. But do you know the guy behind their restaurant empires? By Joseph Guinto

It's a crock. Ninety percent of all restaurants *do not* fail within their first year. Yes, Rocco DiSpirito told us otherwise every week on NBC's *The Restaurant*. But you can't believe everything you see on Reality TV. Donald Trump's hair? Pure fiction.

Still, restaurants do fail. A lot of them. Reliable estimates suggest that more than

half go bust within the first three years. And that makes Joe Bastianich's 15-year, eight-eatery unbeaten streak in the world's toughest restaurant town — New York — all the more amazing. Not only has this guy, at 36, never opened a restaurant that's later closed down, he's never opened a restaurant that didn't turn out to be crazy popular. It helps

rant in 1972, a humble Queens joint called Buonavia. "It was hard work back then," she recalls. "And, I said to my kids, 'You've seen your mother work 16 hours a day, and she loves it, but you don't want to do it.'"

But Joe? Well, he wasn't listening. He started business school at NYU and then worked on Wall Street for a year. He hated



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that. So, after he got his first bonus, he quit, took the money, and moved to Italy. He bought an old Volkswagen and drove across the country working for various restaurants and wineries.

"When I was growing up, there weren't all the celebrity chefs and there wasn't all the money," says the thickset Bastianich, whose stubbly beard matches what's left of his hair. "Restaurants were a very blue-collar way of life. But I had a disdain for what Wall Street was about, and since I had always lived an entrepreneurial kind of life-style growing up, I was drawn back to this business."

Good call, that. Maybe Wall Street would have worked out, but it's hard to imagine Bastianich making more coin trading hog futures than he does running restaurants. The places he owns with Batali — Babbo Ristorante e Enoteca, Lupa Osteria Romana, Esca, Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, Casa Mono, the Spotted Pig, and Bistro du Vent — never seem to play to empty tables.

That's especially true of Babbo, the critically acclaimed West Village Italian restaurant that, in 1998, became the first pairing of Batali and Bastianich. Babbo is still one of the hardest tables to score in New York. Want a reservation? You'd better be a Jedi master at redial. In New York, the joke goes that *Babbo* is Italian for "busy signal."

THINGS NOS. 2 AND 3: It helps to know something about business. Also, cooks should, like, you know, cook.

Today, Joe Bastianich's restaurant group isn't the blue-collar affair that his mother's early eateries were. The group is too big for that now, too well known. These days, it's more like pink pocket square.

That's the accoutrement Bastianich is styling when he meets me on the patio of Becco, a Theater District restaurant he first partnered with his mother on in 1991. He's dapper yet casual, having paired the pocket square with a blue blazer, boldly striped pink-and-white shirt, light-blue jeans, and brown, square-toed shoes that scream "Italian." Bastianich flicks a pair of sugar packets over his second cappuccino of the day and explains that restaurants only *seem* like simple enterprises. They're not. "Restaurants usually fail not because the chef can't cook or because the host is not hospitable, but because they're undercapitalized or they don't

understand their real estate deal or basic finance," he says. "It was just a lucky accident that I acquired that kind of knowledge."

Thing is, Bastianich doesn't expect that everyone in his restaurants will seek the same smarts. In fact, he figures they shouldn't. "In the back of the house, which I'm responsible for, we try to take care of all the nitty-gritty, all the financial details," Bastianich says. "That way we allow our artists — our chefs and our talent partners — to be free to do what they're best at."

THING NO. 4: Even restaurants need farm teams.

There are all kinds of reasons to expand your business. The best might be that your people want you to. Take Dave Pasternack, the chef at Esca. The restaurant introduced Italian-style raw fish to this country. Called *crudo*, the approach is to take pristine slices of fish, serve them in pools of fragrant, pricey olive oil, and dust them with chunky, pricey sea salt. It's great, if you like that kind of thing. But Pasternack must have gotten tired of not turning on the oven. So he asked Batali and Bastianich — the kings of Italian eateries — if they'd be interested in opening a French bistro. Today, Pasternack is their partner in Bistro du Vent, a traditional French spot around the corner from Esca.

"If you want to grow a great farm team, you've got to keep on calling the players up and giving them something new to do," Bastianich explains. "Our growth is not [only] fueled by our ambition, but also by our vision to have great people and to convince them to stay with us."

They do attract great people. Nancy Silverton, the well-regarded founder of Los Angeles's La Brea Bakery, is now partnering with Batali and Bastianich for a mozzarella bar and trattoria tentatively called *Mozza Bar and Trattoria*. It has *franchise* written all over it. But no one's talking about such things yet. Instead, they're talking Las Vegas in 2006.

That seems odd for Team Batali-Bastianich. True, nearly every fancy chef in the country has opened an outpost in the Nevada desert. But Batali and Bastianich don't seem the outpost type — their places are uniquely New York, hard to transplant. So they won't transplant one, exactly. "The easiest thing to do in Vegas would be to open a restaurant and call it Babbo," Bastianich

says. "But we're not doing that. It'll be called something else. It's not about duplicating; it's about finding new ways to grow."

THING NO. 5: It's okay to worry about the guys out in the manhole.

It's a perfect early spring day in New York, but the patio of Becco is empty and Joe Bastianich is fretting over the work crew that's ruining the lunchtime ambience. The crew is out on 46th Street, Manhattan's restaurant row, doing something down in a manhole. Something that requires the use of a big, long, noisy pump. They're extracting ... well, it's hard to say what it is exactly.

"I guess that's why nobody's out here," Bastianich says through his native Queens

“Babbo is still one of the hardest tables to score in New York. Want a reservation? You'd better be a Jedi master at redial.”

accent. "Those guys are makin' a racket."

Of course, Bastianich & Co. could probably do without a few patio tables for a few hours. They are makin' a killin' these days. But that's not really how he sees it. "You make money in a restaurant by understanding all the little details that affect your profit," Bastianich says. "My mother taught me that. It's about gathering up the nickels and dimes to get the dollars. Every little detail matters."

Still, Bastianich doesn't complain to the workers in the manhole. Indeed, this is no ranting, raving reality-TV restaurateur. He's the real thing, calm and cool. Stern, yes. But rarely nasty.

"You always hear stories about this kind of insanity behind the scenes in restaurants,

and I think that usually comes from the top people," says Bastianich's friend Elvis Mitchell, a former *New York Times* movie critic and now a film executive. "Joe is not insane. He's a decent person who exudes a low-key self-assurance when he walks into a room, which tells you he's as important as Mario."

THING NO. 6: Hobbies are good — if you can make money off them.

Joe Bastianich knows a lot of things many of us don't. For instance, he knows how to fold a pocket square. He also knows Italian wine. He's arguably the leading U.S. authority on Italy's wines, having literally written the book on the subject — a comprehensive tome called *Vino Italiano*. The book includes a mention of a certain Azienda Agricola Bastianich, a winery Bastianich owns in his family's native Friuli, where he takes his wife and three young kids every summer.

The wine stuff is more than a sidelight. This year, Bastianich was named outstanding wine and spirits professional, winning a James Beard award — the Oscar for foodies. That's in recognition of his store, Italian Wine Merchants, which he owns with Batali, and the wine lists Bastianich has put together at several restaurants — lists that have helped bring new respect to Italian wines not named Chianti or Pinot Grigio.

The wine thing, it's his hobby and his passion. "Running the winery is the full-time job I'd love to have but can't afford to take," Bastianich quips. But he's still found a way to make his love for Italian wine a part of his business. That's what successful restaurateurs do. The very best offer us not just their tables and chairs and something nice to nosh on. They offer us something that they care about. Personally. You get that in a visit to Babbo. One bite of Batali's food tells you he's passionate about all of it, including those pink peppercorns on your plate. And you get it when you see Bastianich, the owner of a multimillion-dollar restaurant group, out on the floor every night, serving wine, clearing tables, whatever. The restaurants don't seem like a job so much as Joe Bastianich's personal quest to fill our bellies, quench our thirst, and make us happy.

And if he and a lot of other people can make a nice profit along the way, well, lucky us. **AW**

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