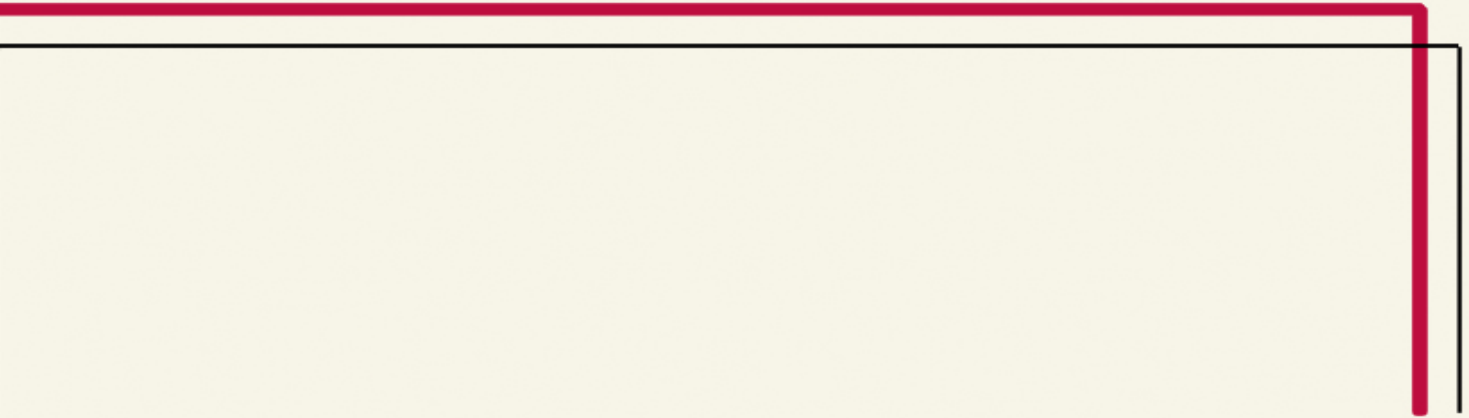




VINTAGE



HEAT

BILL BUFORD

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About the Book

Bill Buford, an enthusiastic, if rather chaotic, home cook, was asked by the *New Yorker* to write a profile of Mario Batali, a Falstaffian figure of voracious appetites who runs one of New York's most successful three-star restaurants. Buford accepted the commission, on the condition Batali allowed him to work in his kitchen, as his slave. He worked his way up to 'line cook' and then left New York to learn from the very teachers who had taught his teacher: preparing game with Marco Pierre White, making pasta in a hillside trattoria, finally becoming apprentice to a Dante-spouting butcher in Chianti.

Heat is a marvellous hybrid: a memoir of Buford's kitchen adventures, the story of Batali's amazing rise to culinary fame, a dazzling behind-the-scenes look at a famous restaurant, and an illuminating exploration of why food matters. It is a book to delight in, and to savour.

About the Author

Bill Buford is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, where he was previously the fiction editor for eight years. He was editor-in-chief for *Granta* magazine for sixteen years and was also the publisher of Granta Books. He is the author of *Among the Thugs*. He lives in New York City.

ALSO BY BILL BUFORD

Among the Thugs

For Jessica

. . . che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

HEAT

An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen
Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker and
Apprentice to a Butcher in Tuscany

Bill Buford

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

DINNER WITH MARIO

A human being is primarily a bag for putting food into; the other functions and faculties may be more godlike, but in point of time they come afterwards. A man dies and is buried, and all his words and actions are forgotten, but the food he has eaten lives after him in the sound or rotten bones of his children. I think it could be plausibly argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion. The Great War, for instance, could never have happened if tinned food had not been invented. And the history of the past four hundred years in England would have been immensely different if it had not been for the introduction of root-crops and various other vegetables at the end of the Middle Ages, and a little later the introduction of non-alcoholic drinks (tea, coffee, cocoa) and also of distilled liquors to which the beer-drinking English were not accustomed. Yet it is curious how seldom the all-importance of food is recognized. You see statues everywhere to politicians, poets, bishops, but none to cooks or bacon-curers or market gardeners.

—GEORGE ORWELL, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

THE FIRST GLIMPSE I had of what Mario Batali's friends had described to me as the "myth of Mario" was on a cold Saturday night in January 2002, when I invited him to a birthday dinner. Batali, the chef and co-owner of Babbo, an Italian restaurant in Manhattan, is such a famous and proficient cook that he's rarely invited to people's homes for a meal, he told me, and he went out of his way to be a grateful guest. He arrived bearing his own quince-flavored grappa (the rough, distilled end-of-harvest grape juices rendered almost drinkable by the addition of the fruit); a jar of homemade *nocino* (same principle, but with walnuts); an armful of wine; and a white, dense slab of *lardo*—literally, the raw "lardy" back of a very fat pig, one he'd cured himself with herbs and salt. I was what might generously be described as an enthusiastic cook, more confident than competent (that is, keen but fundamentally clueless), and to this day I am astonished that I had the nerve to ask over someone of Batali's reputation, along with six guests who thought they'd have an amusing evening witnessing my humiliation. (Mario was a friend of the birthday friend, so I'd thought—why not invite him, too?—but when, wonder of wonders, he then accepted and I told my wife, Jessica, she was apoplectic with wonder: "What in the world were you thinking of, inviting a famous chef to our apartment for dinner?")

In the event, there was little comedy, mainly because Mario didn't give me a chance. Shortly after my being instructed that only a moron would let his meat rest by wrapping it in foil after cooking it, I cheerfully gave up and let Batali tell me what to do. By then he'd taken over the evening, anyway. Not long into it, he'd cut the *lardo* into thin

slices and, with a startling flourish of intimacy, laid them individually on our tongues, whispering that we needed to let the fat melt in our mouths to appreciate its intensity. The *lardo* was from a pig that, in the last months of its seven-hundred-and-fifty-pound life, had lived on apples, walnuts, and cream (“The best song sung in the key of pig”), and Mario convinced us that, as the fat dissolved, we’d detect the flavors of the animal’s happy diet—there, in the back of the mouth. No one that evening had knowingly eaten pure fat before (“At the restaurant, I tell the waiters to call it prosciutto bianco”), and by the time Mario had persuaded us to a third helping everyone’s heart was racing. Batali was an impressively dedicated drinker—he mentioned in passing that, on trips to Italy made with his Babbo co-owner, Joe Bastianich, the two of them had been known to put away a case of wine during an evening meal—and while I don’t think that any of us drank anything like that, we were, by now, very thirsty (the *lardo*, the salt, the human heat of so much jollity) and, cheered on, found ourselves knocking back more and more. I don’t know. I don’t really remember. There were also the grappa and the *nocino*, and one of my last images is of Batali at three in the morning—a stoutly round man with his back dangerously arched, his eyes closed, a long red ponytail swinging rhythmically behind him, an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, his red Converse high-tops pounding the floor—playing air guitar to Neil Young’s “Southern Man.” Batali was forty-one, and I remember thinking it had been a long time since I’d seen a grown man play air guitar. He then found the soundtrack for *Buena Vista Social Club*, tried to salsa with one of the women guests (who promptly fell over a sofa), moved on to her boyfriend, who was unresponsive, put on a Tom Waits CD instead, and sang along as he washed the dishes and swept the floor. He reminded me of an arrangement we’d made for the next day—when I’d invited Batali to dinner, he’d reciprocated by asking me to join him at a New York

Giants football game, tickets courtesy of the commissioner of the NFL, who had just eaten at Babbo—and then disappeared with three of my friends, assuring them that, with his back-of-the-hand knowledge of downtown establishments open until five, he'd find a place to continue the evening. They ended up at Marylou's in the Village—in Batali's description, "A wise guy joint where you can get anything at any time of night, and none of it good."

It was daylight when Batali got home. I learned this from his building superintendent the next morning, as the two of us tried to get Batali to wake up—the commissioner's driver was waiting outside. When Batali finally appeared, forty-five minutes later, he was momentarily perplexed, standing in the doorway of his apartment in his underwear and wondering why I was there, too. (Batali has a remarkable girth, and it was startling to see him clad so.) Then, in minutes, he transformed himself into what I would come to know as the Batali look: the shorts, the clogs, the wraparound sunglasses, the red hair pulled back into its ponytail. One moment, a rotund Clark Kent in his underpants; the next, "*Molto Mario*"—the clever, many-layered name of his cooking television program, which, in one of its senses, literally means *Very Mario* (that is, an *intensified Mario*, an *exaggerated Mario*)—and a figure whose renown I didn't appreciate until, as guests of the commissioner, we were allowed onto the field before the game. Fans of the New York Giants are so famously brutish as to be cartoons (bare-chested on a wintry morning or wearing hard hats; in any case, not guys putting in their domestic duty in the kitchen), and I was surprised by how many recognized the ponytailed chef, who stood facing them, arms crossed over his chest, beaming. "Hey, Molto!" they shouted. "What's cooking, Mario?" "Mario, make me a pasta!" At the time, *Molto Mario* was shown on afternoons on cable television, and I found a complex picture of the working metropolitan male emerging, one rushing home the

moment his shift ended to catch lessons in braising his broccoli rabe and getting just the right forked texture on his homemade orecchiette. I stood back with one of the security people, taking in the spectacle (by now members of the crowd were chanting “Molto, Molto, Molto”)—this very round man, whose manner and dress said, “Dude, where’s the party?”

“I love this guy,” the security man said. “Just lookin’ at him makes me hungry.”

MARIO BATALI is the most recognized chef in a city with more chefs than any other city in the world. In addition to Batali’s television show—and his appearances promoting, say, the NASCAR race track in Delaware—he was simply and energetically omnipresent. It would be safe to say that no New York chef ate more, drank more, and was out and about as much. If you live in New York City, you will see him eventually (sooner, if your evenings get going around two in the morning). With his partner, Joe, Batali also owned two other restaurants, Esca and Lupa, and a shop selling Italian wine, and, when we met, they were talking about opening a pizzeria and buying a vineyard in Tuscany. But Babbo was the heart of their enterprise, crushed into what was originally a nineteenth-century coach house, just off Washington Square, in Greenwich Village. The building was narrow; the space was crowded, jostly, and loud; and the food, studiously Italian, rather than Italian-American, was characterized by an over-the-top flourish that seemed to be expressly Batali’s. People went there in the expectation of excess. Sometimes I wondered if Batali was less a conventional cook than an advocate of a murkier enterprise of stimulating outrageous appetites (whatever they might be) and satisfying them intensely (by whatever means). A friend of mine, who’d once dropped by the bar for a drink and was then fed personally by Batali for the next six hours, went on a diet of soft fruit and water for three days. “This

guy knows no middle ground. It's just excess on a level I've never known before—it's food and drink, food and drink, food and drink, until you feel you're on drugs." Chefs who were regular visitors were subjected to extreme versions of what was already an extreme experience. "We're going to kill him," Batali said to me with maniacal glee as he prepared a meal for a rival who had innocently ordered a seven-course tasting menu, to which Batali added a lethal number of extra courses. The starters (all variations in pig) included *lonza* (the cured backstrap from the cream-apple-and-walnut herd), *coppa* (from the shoulder), a fried foot, a porcini mushroom roasted with Batali's own *pancetta* (the belly), plus ("for the hell of it") a pasta topped with *guancia* (the jowls). This year, Mario was trying out a new motto: "Wretched excess is just barely enough."

Batali was born in 1960 and grew up outside Seattle: a suburban kid with a solid *Leave It to Beaver* upbringing. His mother, Marilyn, is English and French Canadian—from her comes her son's flaming red hair and a fair, un-Italian complexion. The Italian is from his father, Armandino, the grandson of immigrants who arrived in the 1890s. When Mario was growing up, his father was a well-paid Boeing executive in charge of procuring airplane parts made overseas, and in 1975, after being posted to Europe, to supervise the manufacturing close-up, he moved his family to Spain. That, according to Gina, Mario's youngest sibling, was when Mario changed. ("He was already pushing the limits.") Madrid, in the post-Franco years (bars with no minimum age, hash hangouts, the world's oldest profession suddenly legalized), was a place of exhilarating license, and Mario seems to have experienced a little bit of everything on offer. He was caught growing marijuana on the roof of his father's apartment building (the first incident of what would become a theme—Batali was later expelled from his dorm in college, suspected of dealing, and, later still, there was some trouble in Tijuana that actually landed him in jail). The

marijuana association also evokes a memory of the first meals Batali remembers preparing, late-night *panini* with caramelized locally grown onions, a local cow's-milk Spanish cheese, and paper-thin slices of chorizo: "The best stoner munch you can imagine; me and my younger brother Dana were just classic stoner kids—we were so happy."

By the time Batali returned to the United States in 1978 to attend Rutgers University, in New Jersey, he was determined to get back to Europe ("I wanted to be a Spanish banker—I *loved* the idea of making a lot of money and living a luxurious life in Madrid"), and his unlikely double major was in business management and Spanish theatre. But after being thrown out of his dorm, Batali got work as a dishwasher at a pizzeria called Stuff Yer Face (in its name alone, destiny was calling), and his life changed. He was promoted to cook, then line cook (working at one "station" in a "line" of stations, making one thing), and then asked to be manager, an offer he turned down. He didn't want the responsibility; he was having too good a time. The life at Stuff Yer Face was fast (twenty-five years later, he still claims he has the record for the most pizzas made in an hour), sexy ("The most booooootiful waitresses in town"), and very buzzy ("I don't want to come off as a big druggie, but when a guy comes into the kitchen with a pizza pan turned upside down, covered with lines of coke, how can you say no?"). When, in his junior year, he attended a career conference hosted by representatives from major corporations, Batali realized he had been wrong; he was never going to be a banker. He was going to be a chef.

"My mother and grandmother had always told me that I should be a cook. In fact, when I was preparing my applications for college, my mother had suggested cooking school. But I said, 'Ma, that's too gay. I don't want to go to cooking school—that's for fags.' " Five years later, Batali was back in Europe, attending the Cordon Bleu in London.

His father, still overseeing Boeing's foreign operations, was now based in England. Gina Batali was there, too, and recalls seeing her eldest brother only when she was getting ready for school and he was returning from his all-night escapades after attending classes during the day and then working at a pub. The pub was the Six Bells, on the King's Road in Chelsea. Mario had been bartending at the so-called American bar ("*No idea* what I was doing"), when a high-priced dining room opened in the back and a chef was hired to run it, a Yorkshire man named Marco Pierre White. Batali, bored by the pace of cooking school, was hired to be the new chef's slave.

Today, Marco Pierre White is regarded as one of the most influential chefs in Britain (as well as the most foul-tempered, most mercurial, and most bullying), and it's an extraordinary fortuity that these two men, both in their early twenties, found themselves in a tiny pub kitchen together. Batali didn't understand what he was witnessing: his restaurant experience had been making strombolis in New Brunswick. "I assumed I was seeing what everyone else already knew. I didn't feel like I was on the cusp of a revolution. And yet, while I had no idea this guy was about to become so famous, I could see he was preparing food from outside the box. He was a genius on the plate. I'd never worked on presentation. I just put shit on the plate." He described White's making a deep green puree from basil leaves and then a white butter sauce, then swirling the green sauce in one direction, and the white sauce in the other, and drawing a swerving line down the middle of the plate. "I had never seen anyone draw fucking lines with two sauces." White would order Batali to follow him to market ("I was his whipping boy—'Yes, master,' I'd answer, 'whatever you say, master' ") and they'd return with game birds or ingredients for some of the most improbable dishes ever to be served in an English pub: *écrevisses* in a reduced lobster sauce, oysters with caviar, roasted ortolan (a rare, tiny bird

served virtually breathing, gulped down, innards and all, like a raw crustacean)—“the whole menu written out in fucking French.”

According to Batali, White was basically illiterate, but because he was so intuitive and physical—“a beautiful specimen, perfect, a classic body, like a sculpture, with broad shoulders, narrow waist”—he could do things to food that no one else had done before. “He made a hollandaise by beating the sauce so vigorously that it began to froth up and became something else—it was like a sabayon.” He was forever chopping things, reducing them, and making Batali force them through a sieve—“which was no bigger than a fucking tea strainer, because it was a pub and that was all he had, and I’d spend my whole day crushing some chunky shellfish reduction through this tiny thing, ramming it over and over again with a wooden spoon.”

White’s term of choice was “navvy.” “You know, we’re just two guys in the kitchen,” Batali recalls, “and I’m not cooking the fries right, according to him, or the zucchini, or whatever it was, and he tells me to sauté the snow peas instead, while he’s over in the corner doing some dramatic thing with six crayfish, and suddenly he calls out, ‘Bring me the snow peas *now*,’ and I duly bring them over. ‘Here are the snow peas, master,’ but he doesn’t like the look of them. ‘They’re wrong, you asshole. They’re overcooked, you fucking moron. You’ve ruined them, you goddamn fucking navvy.’ But I’m an American, and I didn’t understand what ‘navvy’ meant, and I’d say something like ‘Navvy this, navvy that, if you don’t like my snow peas then make them yourself,’ which made him even angrier.” He threw a risotto into Batali’s chest. He beat up an Irish kid who washed the dishes. “He was intimidating,” Batali recalls. He stuck it out for four months—“I was frightened for my life, this guy was a mean motherfucker”—then dumped two handfuls of salt into a beurre blanc and walked out.

“I will never forget him,” White said, when I met him in London. “He has fucking big calves, doesn’t he? He should donate them to the kitchen when he dies. They’ll make a great osso buco. If he walked in today, and I saw only those calves, I’d know it was Mario.” According to White, Mario wasn’t taking his calling seriously. “The sleeping thing killed him.” He would have been a perfectly competent chef, White said, if only he’d got up when his alarm went off. He recalls dispatching Batali to buy tropical fruit. “He came back with four avocados. He was worn out. He didn’t know what he was doing. He’d been out until four in the morning. He was wild. Hard core. Joy Division was his favorite band, and that says it all.” White put his finger to his nose and sniffed. “Know what I mean?” White shook his head. “Would it be fair to say that, in those days, his enthusiasm for gastronomy was considerably greater than his talent? Is that a fair comment? Has his talent caught up?”

In White’s kitchen, Batali was a failure, and you can tell that he’d like to dismiss the experience but can’t: after all, White was the first person to show Batali what a chef could be. As a result, White is both loathed by Batali and respected. Even now, twenty years later, you hear in Batali’s account a nagging irritation at his failure to charm or work with someone who understood so much about the potential of food—that “it was a wide-open game.” From White, Batali learned the virtues of presentation, speed, stamina, and intense athletic cooking. And from White he acquired a hatred of things French. Batali has an injunction against reduced sauces, the business of boiling a meat broth until it is reduced to an intense syrup. (“If you can run your finger through it and it leaves an impression, then it’s not me, we won’t serve it, it’s too French.”) And a prohibition against tantrums. (“It’s so old school, so made for the movies.”) But mainly Batali learned how much he had to learn.

Provoked by White's command, Batali embarked on a grand tour of the grandest restaurants in Europe, tracing White's skills back to their origins like someone following a genealogical line: the Tour d'Argent in Paris; the Moulin de Mougins, in Provence; the Waterside Inn, outside London, then regarded as the best restaurant in Britain. "In four months, you learn the essentials of the place," Batali told me. "If you want to learn them properly, you have to stay a year, to cook through the seasons. But I was in a hurry." Most of the time, Batali was stuck doing highly repetitive tasks: squeezing duck carcasses, night after night, using a machine designed to get that extra ounce of juice to go into a duck stock, which, in turn, would be reduced into one of those "sticky, gummy" sauces for which Batali was developing such a distaste. "You learn by working in the kitchen. Not by reading a book or watching a television program or going to cooking school. That's how it's done."

That's what I wanted to do—to work in the Babbo kitchen, as Mario's slave.

KITCHEN SLAVE



Serendipitously, I found that a man cooking turned out to be seductive. I'd invited a woman over for dinner—let's call her Mary Alice. I put on some Erroll Garner, then some Miles Davis, then "Moonglow" and the theme from *Picnic*, the most romantic music I know from the most romantic love scene ever filmed, and brought out the first course which I'd made beforehand—shrimp Rothschild, which is hollowed-out loaves of bread sautéed in clarified butter, then filled with shrimp braised in fish stock for just a couple of minutes, the stock then reduced practically to a syrup, topped off in the oven with some Gruyère and a slice of truffle. I brought it to her.

"Oh," she said and followed me back to the kitchen where I put together the tournedos Rossini—small filets of beef topped with foie gras, a truffle slice, and a Madeira reduction.

"Ah." She began asking very detailed questions about what I was doing and who I was.

What cinched it was a spectacular creation called Le Talley-rand. You make it with canned cherries of all things and ground almonds and sugar, cover them with a meringue, and in the meringue you put half an empty eggshell, bake it, and for the spectacular part you turn off the lights, ignite a little kirsch or rum,

pour it into the eggshell when it comes out of the oven all browned, and it looks like a small volcano—which is where things can get very moist.

Mary Alice's eyes were limpid and beseeching. "You're the deepest and most complex man I know, and I love your knowledge and your fingers . . . but I made another date tonight at ten." And off she went to spend the night with another guy. All my work went to benefit him! And he never even called to thank me.

—JONATHAN REYNOLDS, *Dinner with Demons*, 2003

I WAS ACCEPTED “inside” on a trial basis. “The question is space,” Mario said. “Is there room for another body?” There wasn’t. There wasn’t room for the people already there. But somehow I squeezed in. To start, I’d do a night or two plating pasta plus Fridays in the prep kitchen, preparing food for the evening. Mario then invited me to attend a Saturday morning kitchen meeting. It was January 26th, 2002.

Twenty people showed up, gathered round a long table upstairs, Mario in the middle. In April, *The Babbo Cookbook* would be published, and its publication, he said, had a number of implications. “We’ll come under more scrutiny. There’ll be television crews, bigger crowds, and, most importantly, the critics will be back.” Babbo was a three-star restaurant and, according to Mario, was now likely to be reassessed to see if it still deserved its stars. What he really meant was that the new *New York Times* restaurant critic hadn’t written about Babbo, and he might use the occasion of the book’s publication to pay a visit, and Mario wanted everyone to be ready. “What’s more,” Mario said, “because the book will reveal our secrets, we’re going to have to change our menu.” He invited ideas for dishes and suggested that his cooks read through old recipes, looking for a traditional thing that can be made new. He then reminded everyone of the three essential principles of the kitchen: that we were there “to buy food, fix it up, and sell it at a profit—that’s what we do”; that consistency was essential (“If someone has a great dish and returns to have it again, and you don’t serve it to him in exactly the same way, then you’re a dick”); and that the success of Babbo,

“the best Italian restaurant in America,” had arisen from its style: “More feminine than masculine. People should think there are grandmothers in the back preparing their dinner.”

When Mario was finished, Andy Nusser, the executive chef, the one running the kitchen day to day, brought up a labor issue: kitchen rage. Andy was forty-one, Mario’s age, but wholly different in appearance, Apollonian to his boss’s Dionysian. He was six feet with a swimmer’s broad shoulders and boyish good looks, his age betrayed only by the fact that his big head of hair had started to gray. He’d been at Babbo since it opened. His manner (austere, unfrivolous, in a hurry) conveyed discipline and a military-like respect for the rules. A cook, Andy announced, had just been fired because he couldn’t control his temper. He had banged pots, thrown utensils, “poisoned the kitchen with his anger.” The behavior, Andy said, wasn’t to be tolerated. Mario interrupted to make suggestions: take a break before the service starts, because otherwise “the stress will enter your cooking and we’ll taste it.” He offered strategies for the week: even though you might have to work thirteen, fourteen, possibly fifteen hours on “your first day, because the first day back is always brutal, your second day is easier, and the last day of your week will be a breeze. You can show up at two o’clock.” A shift ends around one in the morning; even if you start at two in the afternoon, your day was still a lazy eleven hours long.

“Be patient,” Andy added. “Stick it out. I know most of us are here because we want to be running restaurants of our own.”

I looked round the room. The average age was thirty-something. Most of the people were men. They were pale and unshaven. Many spoke English badly. Were they all here because they hoped to be running their own restaurants?

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY, at seven a.m. I presented myself to the prep chef, a handsome, athletic woman in her forties named

Elisa Sarno. I was eager, hopeful, utterly ready. But Elisa didn't seem all that happy to see me.

I put on an apron and jacket, and was given a tour. One corner of the kitchen was taken up by the “walk-in,” a refrigerated closet about the size of a small truck with floor-to-ceiling shelves. That week's *New York Times* restaurant review was pasted on the door, as was the custom—a reminder of the competition and of the importance of Babbo's three stars (very few restaurants, you learned, got even two). Another corner was given over to dishwashing. Pots, pans, and various plastic containers were stored overhead. Elisa was describing each one according to its size, but I was distracted by the dishwasher, a young angry man (I wasn't introduced but later discovered his name was Alejandro) who was assaulting a pot the size of a suburban trash can with a high-pressured gadget that was spraying water powerfully in unpredictable directions. “These are the one-quarts,” Elisa was saying meanwhile, “and here are the two-quarts, four-quarts, six-quarts, and eight, all with their own color-coded lid. Hotel pans and half hotels are there, along with sheet trays and half-sheet trays.” The containers, I learned, were the medium of the prep kitchen—everything you did went into them so that it could be fetched later in the evening—and great weight would be expressed in questions such as: “Is *this* (chicken feet, say, or a quantity of beef cheeks) to be put in a six-quart, or will it fit into a four?” I was already thinking about the private autistic language of the kitchen, in which everyone around me was so demonstrably fluent—is this what you learn in cooking school, what a hotel pan is?—when Elisa stopped suddenly. “Where did you put your knives?” she asked.

“My knives?”

“You don't have knives?”

“I'm meant to have knives?”

“Oh, my God. Okay. Bring them next week.” She muttered to herself: “God, I hate lending people my knives.”

She led me into the walk-in, talking very fast now, wanting to get on with her day. “This is where we put stuff for the grilling station”—she pointed to a shelf packed with green-lidded containers, indistinguishable from all the other shelves, also packed with green-lidded containers. “This is the pasta shelf. This, the pantry shelf. This, the sauté shelf. Oh, yes, and this is the masking tape. Everything is labeled and dated. Where’s your pen? You didn’t bring a pen?”

Vegetables were in the back—crates of carrots, celery, white onions. Fish had been stacked on the floor, delivered before I arrived, some silver Mediterranean monstrosity.

“Time to bone the ducks. Come.”

There were four boxes of ducks, six in each box.

“Wipe the counter, wet a cloth—do you remember where the cloths are?—get a cutting board” (Where are they again? I asked, panicking), “an eight-quart and two four-quarts, a hotel pan” (which ones were the hotel pans?) “and parchment paper. You get sheets from the pastry station. The four-quarts will be for the gizzards. Here, take one of my knives. Will you bring your knives next week?”

Yes, yes, of course.

“Unpack the duck from the top, so you don’t get blood all over you. Remove the gizzards. Liver goes in one container, kidneys in the other. Remove the legs to make a confit, but first chop off the knobby bit at the bottom with a chopper—here, use this,” she said, handing me a giant tomahawk, “—and then remove the breast. You do know how to bone a duck, don’t you?”

“Well, I think, yes, I do. I mean, I’ve done it.” But when? I seem to recall a dinner party. Was that in 1993?

“And you know about the oyster of meat?”

“The oyster?” I asked, and my mind did a simple calculation. Duck, an animal with wings: fowl. Oyster, molecular thing without wings: mollusk. Ducks don’t have oysters; oysters don’t have ducks. “The oyster?” I repeated.

“Yes, it’s the nugget of meat you don’t want to lose. It’s here,” she said, swiftly cutting the breast in half and whipping her knife round the thigh. She had an appealingly easy manner with the knife, which seemed to involve no effort, and the meat instantaneously cleaved in two. I was thinking, I want to learn how to do that, and ended up not quite getting the location of the duck oyster—was it in front of the thigh or behind?—when she was off. A delivery man had appeared, bearing boxes of meat.

I looked around the kitchen. The pastry chefs were beside me, two guys cutting up pineapples. In front of me was a wall of stoves, with vats of something boiling on top. Behind me two guys were making pasta. On the floor was a giant mixer, rhythmically knocking around a large mound of dough. It was seven-fifteen in the morning.

I picked up a duck, removed the wings, and hunted around for that oyster. I felt an obligation to honor this bird in my hand by ensuring that its thigh oyster found its way onto the plate. But where was the little fucker?

I slowly got through my first ducks and stacked their parts on my cutting board. The idea was that you should whip through each one, slice, slice, slice, just as Elisa had done—the knife doing that effortless trick, all edge, no pressure, the meat opening up like magic—and drop each bit into its appropriate container. But I wasn’t sure I was getting it right. I piled my thighs on one corner of my cutting board, burying my first hacked-up experiments under some of the better examples, just in case Elisa came round to inspect my work.

Meanwhile, she was opening up the meat boxes. (“Frozen pig cheeks,” she was saying to the delivery man, “frozen is no good for me.”) The delivery man didn’t reply. He was staring at me. (“Did you count these lamb shanks?” Elisa was asking him. “It’s never the number you say—I can’t run a kitchen if I don’t know the number of lamb shanks.”) What was wrong with this delivery guy? His stare was making me

very self-conscious. Don't you have better things to do? You think it's entertaining to watch a guy ruining twenty-four entrées because he can't find the oyster?

I looked across to one of the cooks, who seemed to be boning quails, a much more challenging operation. And he was doing it at staggering speed. The delivery man hadn't moved. Was he actually shaking his head?—when, somehow, I dragged the blade of Elisa's knife, smoothly and delicately, across the top of my forefinger—from behind the first knuckle to the nail. There was a moment: did I just do what I think I did? Yes. And the top of my finger erupted in a gush of red blood.

"Did you just slice yourself?" Elisa asked, breaking off her lamb-shank count and in a tone that said, You've been here half an hour, and this is what you've done?

"Yes," I said, "but not to worry," as I wrapped my hand up in a meaty, soiled cloth. "I do this all the time. You should look at my fingers. A road map of scars and nicks. I think I need to wear glasses. Nearsighted. Or farsighted. Both, actually. Really, it's what I do."

"Do you need to go to the hospital?" It sounded like an accusation.

I shook my head, a little worried by her worry. There was a lot of blood.

"Band-Aids are in the refrigerator," she said. "You'll need to wear a rubber glove. The Band-Aids won't stay dry."

I retreated to the dining room, crunched up the wound with a crisscrossing of Band-Aids, wrestled my finger into a surgeon's glove, and returned. It was nearly nine o'clock, and my cutting board had a modest square of about five inches of work space. The rest of it was stacked with pieces of duck.

I resumed. Chop, trim, twist, pop, thwack. I cleared my board. And, as I did, the Band-Aids started to work themselves loose, and the clear synthetic surgeon's glove started to expand and droop, filling up like a water balloon

with my blood. The truth is, I am always slicing off little bits of me, but I could see that if I sliced off a little bit of this glove it was going to be a mess. I was falling behind, and Elisa was looking at me.

She picked up a thigh. To me, it looked like I'd got the oyster. In front and back, wherever the thing was, there was plenty of meat. That wasn't the problem.

"There's too much fat," she said, trimming it off, and added, as if she'd failed to mention a crucial instruction, "you *are* aware that these are going to be served to people."

I CAME TO REGARD the prep kitchen as something like a culinary boot camp, especially during my first weeks, where I was being taught basic techniques of being a cook, especially knife skills. It seemed that I'd been using a knife for years without knowing how to use one. On that first morning, I paused to sharpen my knife—well, Elisa's knife, actually—and she stopped what she was doing and stared: I was doing it backward (ergo, I had always been doing it backward). Then, there was the rocking thing. The idea is that, when you're chopping food you want to leave the tip of your knife in place, on the cutting board: you end up rocking the knife back and forth, and the blade then slides effortlessly, and with much more control, through whatever you're chopping. Everyone who cooks probably knows this, but I didn't.

Some techniques seemed fussy. Carrots were a trauma. Long-cooking meat broths have carrots in them, along with celery, onions, and herbs, which soften the meatiness of a meat liquid. This was something I knew, or at least I thought I did. I'd made broths at home—soups, chicken stocks, that sort of thing—and I'd simply tossed in my carrots, chopped up or not: what did it matter if they were going to cook for hours? Wrong.

Evidently, there are only two ways to prepare a carrot: rough cut and fine dice. Rough cut meant slicing the carrot in half lengthwise and then—chop, chop, chop—cutting it into perfectly identical half moons (which, to my eye, had nothing rough about them).

The nightmare was fine dice, which meant cutting every bit of the carrot into identical one-millimeter-square cubes.

A carrot is not shaped like a cube, and so you first had to trim it up into a long rectangle, then cut it into thin, one-millimeter planks, and then take your one-millimeter planks and cut them into long, one-millimeter slivers, and then take your perfectly formed slivers, and, chop, chop, chop, cut them into one-millimeter cubes. I seemed to have done my first batch almost right—either that or it was late and everyone was in a hurry and no one looked too closely at the geometric mishmash in the container I'd filled. My second batch involved thirty-six carrots. It took me a long time to cube thirty-six carrots. Normally, Elisa popped round to make sure I wasn't mangling what I was working on, but she must have trusted me with the carrots—after all, what can you do to a carrot?—so when she finally looked in I was almost done. She shrieked, "I said fine dice! This is not a fine dice! I don't know what they are, but they're wrong." I had been cutting carrots for two hours, and then, like that, they were tossed; they were *that* bad. I wanted to weep. It took me three days before I could tell anyone about the experience ("She threw away my carrots—all of them!"), and even then I could hear the quiver of indignation in my voice. It was a month later that I finally succeeded in getting the carrots right, although the achievement—"Wow," Elisa said, picking up my four-quart and dumping the contents into a braising liquid, "these are good"—was secretly marred by my having covertly eaten several hundred imperfect little squares.

I cubed pork for a ragù (only after my first batch was returned—"These are chunks, I asked for cubes") and

learned how to trim the fat off a flank of beef. Jointing rabbits, I was taught how to tie up the loin with a butcher's looping knot and was so excited by the discovery that I went home and practiced. I told Elisa about my achievement. "I tied up everything," I said. "A leg of lamb, some utensils, a chair. My wife came home, and I tied up her, too." Elisa shook her head. "Get a life," she said and returned to her task.

I became captivated by the kitchen's smells. By midmorning, when many things had been prepared, they were cooked in quick succession, and the smells came, one after the other, waves of smell, like sounds in music. There was the smell of meat, and the kitchen was overwhelmed by the rich, sticky smell of wintry lamb. And then, in minutes, it would be chocolate melting in a metal bowl. Then a disturbing nonsequitur like tripe (a curious disjunction, having chocolate in your nose followed quickly by stewing cow innards). Then something ripe and fishy—octopus simmering in a hot tub—followed by what seemed like overextracted pineapple. And so they came, one after the other—huckleberries, chicken broth, the comforting chemistry of veal, pork, and milk as someone prepared a Bolognese ragù.

Until now, my cooking had been based on what I got from books. I was a home cook, always longing to do more than a simple supper, although my meals, especially when prepared for friends, tended to be stressful affairs, distinguished by two incompatible qualities: their ambition and my lack of experience. My friends would do a calculation, trying to figure out just how late they should show up, because they knew what they'd see if they got it wrong: their host bespattered, in a panic, unbathed, and wishing they'd go away. Once, guests arrived at the height of a modest conflagration, a black cloud billowing out of the kitchen, as I stood at the door, paralyzed, unable to remember how to put out a grease fire.