



The tale of a New York restaurateur

The lesser-known counterpart to Batali & Bastianich Hospitality Group, Joseph Bastianich, is a man of many talents with a fascinating tale, writes **Simone Miché**



Among the most well-known of restaurateurs to have made it big in New York's vast fine dining scene are Danny Meyer of Gramercy Tavern; Keith McNally of Balthazar and Ken Friedman of gourmet gastro pub, The Spotted Pig, to name just three. None, however, can lay claim to the multi-talented title of a noted author, TV personality and judge, triathlete and restaurateur. Aside from Joe Bastianich, of course.

Joe has treaded the path of some of life's most adventurous avenues, and with enviable success. Before his rise to restaurateur fame he even toyed with a career in finance on Wall Street, using his knowledge of wines to level out the playing field with the so-called "masters of the universe." But that's fuel for another story.

The tale of his climb to the top ranks of the restaurant industry is exciting enough in itself. It begins on a small side street in Queens, New York, where Joe grew up, steeped in the on-goings of restaurant life at his parents' Italian restaurant, Buonavia. By the age of 14, recommending and serving wine to his parents' patrons, any one would have guessed that Joe was destined for a life in the restaurant business. It first took a walk down Wall Street and a trip to his motherland, Italy, to finally get there.

Joe is a restaurateur, vineyard owner and judge on *MasterChef* (USA), *MasterChef Italia* and *MasterChef Junior*.

In 1992, after packing in a job as a bond trader at Merrill Lynch, Joe bought a one-way ticket to Italy and found himself travelling from the north to the south, working in restaurants and vineyards and immersing himself in the rich culinary traditions of his Italian heritage. It was the welcome break Joe needed which inspired him to take up the family business on his return to the States a year later.

Joe's first project came in 1993, in the form of a Manhattan-based restaurant called Becco (Italian for "peck, nibble, savour"), which he opened with his mother who had already forged a successful career as a 'stand and stir' chef on her cooking show, *Lidia's Italy*, which aired in the US in the 90s. After borrowing \$80,000 from his grandmother to open Becco, Joe raked in the reservations with his fixed-price wine list while his mother brought it fame with her homemade pasta. Almost ➤



overnight, the mother-and-son duo along with restaurant Becco became a success and one that still operates in Manhattan's Theatre District, serving good, simple, Italian food in a convivial setting, just as it did 20 years ago.

A few years later, Joe attended a James Beard Foundation awards dinner for "Young Italian Chefs and Sommeliers in America" and met Mario Batali, the Seattle-born chef who shared his own passion for Italian cuisine and vision to bring it stateside in large, appetite-appealing portions.

Together, Joe and Mario have opened many restaurants in several locations, each celebrating Italian cuisine. Their first restaurant, Babbo Ristorante e Enoteca, opened in New York City in June 1998 to critical acclaim, receiving James Beard's Best New Restaurant of 1998 award just a few months after its launch.

Babbo is now one of 25 restaurants worldwide operated under Batali & Bastianich Hospitality Group. Among the most venerable in the US is the ever-popular Del Posto (2005), also in NYC, and Osteria Mozza (2007) in Los Angeles.

In Asia, B&BHG boasts two restaurants, Pizzeria Mozza and Osteria Mozza, which opened at the illustrious Marina Bay Sands in Singapore in 2010 and Lupa Osteria Romana and Carnevino in Hong Kong, which opened in 2012.

The list of restaurants Joe has brought to life is exhausting and yet makes up only a small part in his vast culinary empire. In 2010, Joe partnered with the founder of Eataly—a sprawling artisan Italian food and wine marketplace—Oscar Farnetti, along with his B&BHG business partners Mario and his mother Lidia, to open a New York store.

Yet, Joe's seemingly endless list of projects doesn't stop at food, either. A husband, father, part-time musician and author of several books, Joe has also made himself known as a TV personality and judge on FOX's reality TV hit *MasterChef* with Gordon Ramsay and Graham



Together with Mario Batali, Joe has opened many restaurants across the US, including Babbo, NYC and Osteria Mozza in Los Angeles.

Elliot and on *MasterChef Italia* with fellow judges Carlo Cracco and Bruno Barbieri.

In 2011, he even completed the grueling Ford Ironman World Championships in Kona where he came 1,428th out of 1,918 and at the tail-end of 2013, his sixth New York City marathon.

Which brings us to the present day and the all important question: is there anything the talented Mr. Bastianich can't do? **T**