



BEHIND A TRANSPORTING EXPERIENCE: Joe and Lidia Bastianich and chef Mario Batali of Del Posto, which offers laudacious space and serenity for 120 guests in its main dining room.

Trio stages Italian classic

Bastianiches, Batali pull out all stops at Del Posto; landlord dispute simmers

HARKING BACK to Italian palaces of 50 years ago, Del Posto—the brand-new restaurant of Mario Batali and the mother-son duo of Lidia and Joe Bastianich—is a retro sensation.

The trio has \$12 million on the line in an old Nabisco warehouse in Chelsea. Their creation is so vast, elegant and old-fashioned in a European way that it is, in their words, "counter-trend." Del Posto is grand dining theater, extravagant and operatic at a time when that sort of thing seems passé.

At this writing, its 22,000 square feet of landlord-laced turmoil is highly operatic. Will the tenants pay more than the original lease, or will the new landlords, the city or both shutter the place? For how long? Will the landlords ever get a table at Del Posto?

For all its offstage turmoil, Del Posto offers luxurious space and serenity for the mere 120 guests who visit its main dining room. It has

grand staircases worthy of a Norma Desmond descent; a gorgeous, wraparound balcony; lush drapes; and miles of rich woods, marble, carpet and leather. Piano music from the lounge is audible, if not admired.

The Bastianiches and Mr. Batali, working with architect Glen Coben of Glen & Co., realize their vision of a transporting experience, surrounding patrons with multilayered ambience and service to match. It does wonders for the appetite to see Lidia whisking zabaglione at the huge marble service table in the dining room.

Dinner begins with a basket of freshly baked breads, and preappetizers such as teeny tortellini in capon broth with prosciutto, or a small cup of celery root, parsley and lemon soup.

As Mr. Batali works the tables, the team led by hands-on chef Mark Ladner treats Italian classics with respect, finesse and modest taste tweaking. Tempura-like fritto misto of vegetables arrives with rustic bagna cauda dipping sauce; fried calamari is in a colorful toss with capers and specks of red and green pepper. Antipasti (\$13 to \$19) are perfectly portioned to leave room to explore pastas before *secondi* or main courses.

A notable first would be the zesty pleasure of seafood salad studded with seaweed and borage. Impecca-

bly seasoned funghi misti plays artfully off chicory's crisp tang. If delicious grilled radicchio trevisano with fonduta reminds us of Babbo, so be it.

Tastings of three pastas may be shared by the whole table (\$25 per person) or enjoyed separately (\$18 to \$30). The best orecchiette ever is blended with fennel sausage, chard and mostarda, a condiment of mustard-cured diced citrus. *Agrolotti dal plin*, a dry preparation of filled pasta eaten with the fingers, is a novelty less full-flavored than most others.

Risotto at \$50 for two may seem expensive, but as an early course it can be shared by four. A large open dish is spread with carrot purée and then ladled with rice simmered with Barolo wine and Castelmagno, Piedmont's great cheese, for a tasteful medley.

A table of four may enjoy fully accessorized entrées (\$210 to \$240) such as rack of veal, leg of lamb, pork loin, mixed grill or whole salt-baked fish. If it's two people sharing, there are four dishes, such as superb charred rib eye steak for two. Presented, then sliced tableside, it's served with escarole and artisanal beans from Tuscany.

The unparalleled quality of ingredients and careful, thoughtful cooking and presentation is evident every step of the way. It shows in the finest sources of fresh seafood and game, the Batali thing for offal—kidneys, sweetbreads and calf's liver here—plus intriguing desserts.

The zabaglione Lidia or Joe

whipped may crown a poached pear and pistachio meringue, or nap warm fig pudding with pomegranate sorbetto. Just when it's clear you can eat no more, pastry chef Tai Chopping sends forth a prodigious number of petits fours on rolling carts.

Wine director Morgan Rich orchestrates wine pairings from a 41-page list, decanting bottles and tempering glasses—swirling a few drops of wine to coat the surface before pouring it. The strikingly large, beautiful crystal goblets are hand-blown in Slovenia in different styles for different red wines, as well as white ones.

Del Posto is the most. Oh, I yearn to return.

COMMENTS? cnyb@crain.com



DEL POSTO
85 10th Ave.
(212) 497-8090
★★★★★

CUISINE Italian

WINES 1,200 choices, 36 by the glass

DRESS No rules, but dress up and feel good

NOISE LEVEL Serene

PRICE RANGE \$27-\$60;
five-course tasting menus, \$120

WINE MARKUP 90%-210%

CREDIT CARDS All major

RESERVATIONS Plan ahead

HOURS Dinner, Tues-Thurs.,
5:30-10:30 p.m., Fri-Sat.,
5:30-11 p.m.

★★★★ = Outstanding
★★★★ = Excellent
★★★ = Very good
★★ = Good