

New York gets a gastropub, via Birmingham

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Mario Batali, unquestionably New York's most charismatic chef, has several restaurants to his name. Babbo and Lupa owe their earthy style of cooking to his Italian forebears and, more recently, Bar Jamon and Casa Mono seek their inspiration from the shores and streets of Barcelona.

His latest restaurant, The Spotted Pig, which opened its doors last week has what may seem more prosaic antecedents - it is his, and New York's, first take on a British gastro-pub. And when it has found its culinary feet and impressed the city's discerning eaters it will be because April Bloomfield, the young chef Batali has imported from England, will have achieved her goal and recreated the aromas and flavours which first persuaded her to enrol at Birmingham's College of Food in 1990. Since then Bloomfield has worked at some of Britain's finest restaurants - a couple of stints under Rowley Leigh at Kensington Place; a year at Bibendum under Simon Hopkinson; then with Paul Rankin in Belfast; and, finally, as sous chef under Rose Grey and Ruth Rogers at the River Cafe. Although when we met for lunch for what was her very first interview just before she flew off to America she did say that she had never compiled a written cv - a passion for food and the highly complimentary recommendations of her employers have until now carried her up the still heavily male professional chefs' ladder.

Bloomfield does not look the part. Slim and petite with a shock of pre-Raphaelite hair, she gave no sign of working in a professional kitchen until we shook hands and I could spot the tell tale signs - extremely short fingernails on small hands (which she claims are perfect for rolling pasta) and several, vivid burn marks up both arms. And improbable as it may be to imagine Bloomfield as a head chef it is even more so to see her as a policewoman which was her earliest ambition.

"When I left school in Solihull I applied to become a cadet in the police force but I had left it too late and was told to re-apply in two years. I remember my Mother sitting me down and asking me what I was going to do and as my two elder sisters were already at catering school I thought I would go along and have a look."

"It was the Birmingham College of Food and from the moment I walked in I just loved the place. The smells and aromas from the ethnic kitchens they have there were just wonderful and they have stayed with me ever since."

If, 14 years later Bloomfield still does not look like a chef apart from her arms, she certainly eats like one. No sooner had her first course of scallops been served than she lifted it up to her nose to take in all its aromas, a habit she repeated with her fish main course. And she eats quickly as most professional chefs do.

"What has surprised me most," Bloomfield confessed, "is how much I love cooking. I always knew I could do it but now I just love watching food cook, particularly frying food, and getting the seasoning just right. I am very fortunate - I know that I am in the right job."

Although the name The Spotted Pig could be ye olde English (in fact it was conceived by Batali and his partner Ken Friedman who has been collecting pig imagery for most of his life) Bloomfield's initial menu is as catholic as those of many British gastro-pubs.

Of the ten starters, only two are quintessentially British, plates of oysters and a clam and smoked haddock chowder while the others are in origin either Italian - bresaola marinated in Chianti, crostini of wild mushrooms and tortellini with ricotta - or Middle Eastern, a hummus and aubergine puree with flat bread. Main courses include a hearty spatchcocked pigeon and a chargrilled leg of lamb as well as more esoteric scallops and sea bass and, naturally, an organic burger with, less conventionally, chili jam. Desserts include her alma mater's classic, the River Cafe chocolate nemesis.

But the aim of The Spotted Pig, as far as Batali is concerned, is not for Bloomfield to duplicate what so many British chefs are cooking but rather to be able to offer the casual friendliness that is the leitmotif of a good British pub. "I think, and hope, that a lot of people feel like I do and would like a place to go and eat and relax without the silliness of reservations. The Spotted Pig will, I hope, offer really great food with a point of view and an attitude at a low end entry price point in a very "neighbourhood" neighbourhood which is the West Village. Although, of course, it will get blown out of all proportion in the press," he added with a smile.

And Batali is convinced that in April Bloomfield Birmingham has provided him with just the right chef adding "April came very highly recommended. She takes her food very seriously, but does not take herself or myself too seriously at all. That's how it should be."

The Spotted Pig, Greenwich Street and 11th Street, NY
Open 7 days 1100-0200, 212-620 0393.