

Books

A tasting trip through Spain

Mario Batali and friends sample a newly sophisticated cuisine.

Spain ... A Culinary Road Trip

By Mario Batali
With Gwyneth Paltrow
Ecco. 384 pp. \$34.95

Reviewed by Mary Vaira

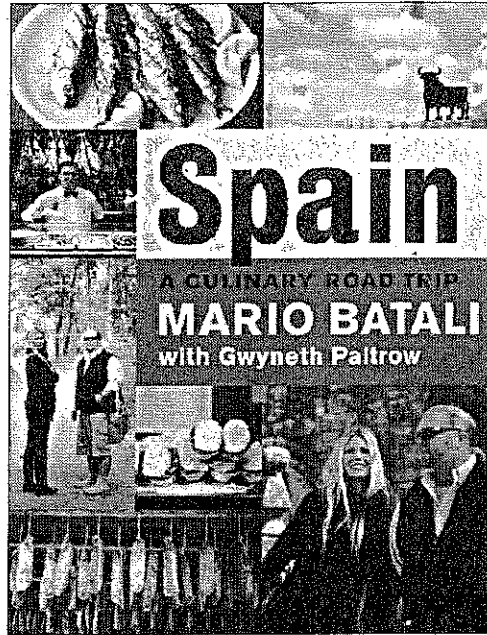
This is a book about a Spanish food road trip. A companion to the public television series *Spain ... On the Road Again*, it records the travels of Mario Batali, noted food author and restaurateur; his co-author, actress Gwyneth Paltrow; Mark Bittman, food columnist for the *New York Times*; and Spanish actress Claudia Basols. More than a cookbook, this is also a travelogue with a sampling of the foods of the different parts of Spain visited by the traveling quartet.

Batali notes that in the last decade Spain has become the leader of the avant-garde food world. (In a recent *Food & Wine* list of the best restaurant cities in the world, two — Barcelona and Madrid — were in Spain.)

Despite this food revolution, Batali devotes the book to the time-honored classical cooking of Spain. The recipes may be the traditional classics, but his presentation is anything but traditional; they sure look much better in this book.

Spanish cookbooks of 10 years ago were dreadful, featuring heavy meals and dishes long passed over by modern cooks. The books themselves were physically dreary, with unappetizing photos and descriptions. Batali sparks up his presentations with color photos and simple recipes. He describes a new Spain — or an old Spain with a new twist, no longer the Spain of Ernest Hemingway, of old bullfight aficionados drinking wine in cafes, talking of death in the afternoon.

Batali and companions describe a bright, lively Spain, with the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao (described by one writer as a “me-



From the book jacket

teorite” for its otherworldly, titanium-skinned look courtesy of architect Frank Gehry), the art of Barcelona, the new Matadero Madrid Cultural Center, and the Caixa-Forum in Madrid. Yet it remains a robust country: The photographs, the food, even the chefs pictured in the book all impart a sense of strength.

Here are a few samples of locale and cuisine:

From Granada: *fideos* with seafood, short pieces of pasta cooked like a rice pilaf, combined with fresh mussels, shrimp in the shell, and clams.

From Figueres, north of Barcelona: *gambas a la plancha*, large shrimp with heads on, cooked with garlic over a bed of salt in a cast-iron skillet.

From Galicia: *caldo gallego*, the traditional full-meal soup of beans, potatoes, and

chorizo (among other ingredients).

From Vic, just north of Barcelona: chicken stuffed with pancetta and pork sausage, slow-cooked for six hours.

From Madrid: *ajo blanco*, a white version of gazpacho.

From Valencia: the traditional paella (easier than you think).

You will note a great deal of seafood in the book. The Spanish are among the leading seafood consumers in the world. There is a saying that “if it swims in the sea or crawls out of it, the Spanish will eat it.”

When not sampling food and visiting restaurants, Batali and his companions observe the country and interview chefs and local celebrities. He includes an interview with architect Gehry and another with Ferran Adrià Acosta, of the *El Bulli* restaurant in Roses on the Costa Brava. Batali calls him the most famous chef in the world, and few would dispute the description.

Batali’s list of recommended restaurants omits quite a few that are equal or superior, and he could have included a few more recipes. Having said that, his central theme — the foods and places of a new Spain — is persuasive and attractively presented.

I’d recommend *Spain ... A Culinary Road Trip* for those who have only recently heard that Spanish food is somewhat different from Mexican; for those who’ve heard there is a country outside of Italy and France worth a visit (Spain is now the second-most-visited country in the world); for those who remember Spain only from student visits in the Franco era and traveling for \$5 a day (forget that; this is a very modern country with modern prices); and for those well acquainted with Spain, its food, and its people. In other words, a good chunk of everyone.

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