

Food and Wine: Barbecue the Batali way â€" big and bold

by *Ron_James*

Most chefs would be embarrassed to wear bright orange clogs - but not Mario Batali. His hip footwear is as much a part of the Batali brand as his short chef's pants, beard and ponytail. The man is a media machine with half a dozen best-selling cookbooks, multiple popular food shows and appearances at almost every major food event in America.

MARIO TAILGATES NASCAR STYLE - Chef Mario Batali spent time with NASCAR tailgaters all over the country to write 'Mario Tailgates NASCAR Style,' a cookbook full of recipes, packing tips and grilling advice for tailgaters and barbecue lovers. CNS Photo. **PORK CHOPS WITH CHERRY BARBECUE SAUCE** - A succulent pork chop gets grilled with a homemade cherry barbecue sauce for a mouthwatering summertime meal. CNS Photo. Batali's journey to stardom began like many great chefs - that is, he didn't want to be a chef initially. Raised in Seattle, his food-loving parents encouraged him to go to cooking school. Instead, he chose to study Spanish theater at Rutgers University, from which he graduated.

Still searching for a career path, he decided to give food a try and enrolled in London's Le Cordon Bleu - and soon dropped out. An apprenticeship with chef Marco Pierre White and three years of intense culinary training in Northern Italy finally put him on the right road.

Batali opened his first restaurant, Po, in New York City and found fame with Babbo Ristorante e Enoteca with business partner Joe Bastianich. And his empire continues to expand - in addition to the seven successful restaurants in Manhattan, he also has two venues at The Venetian in Las Vegas and operates his newest ventures, Pizzeria Mozza and Osteria Mozza in Los Angeles, along with superstar chef Nancy Silverton.

THE DISH

A succulent marinated pork chop with a special barbecue sauce from Batali's recent cookbook "Mario Tailgates NASCAR Style" (Sporting News, \$19.95) is a winning way to get grilling season started.

Batali likes his pork a bit on the pink side. Although there's the old bugaboo about cooking the heck out of pork, a little pink is just fine. Overcooked pork chops are a real waste - once dry and tough no amount of barbecue sauce will help fix that. Use tongs to turn the chops, do not use a fork or the juices will escape.

THE WINE

The combinations in this dish call for a bold wine with enough fruit to match up well with the cherry sauce. A very berry Beckman Vineyards 2005 Estate Syrah Santa Ynez Valley (\$25) is a perfect match. It has lots of dark cherry flavors with hits of sweet spice and pepper. This dark red has excellent acidity and soft tannins with a clean refreshing finish.

The Beckman Vineyards specializes in estate Rhone varietals and are located in the Santa Ynez Valley near Santa Barbara, Calif. This region was made famous by the movie "Sideways" and is producing some of the state's best wines, including chardonnays, cabernets and the much-vaunted pinot noir.

PORK CHOPS WITH CHERRY BARBECUE SAUCE

Marinade:

2 tablespoons packed brown sugar

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup freshly squeezed orange juice (about 1 orange)

2 teaspoons chili powder

1 teaspoon cumin

4 boneless pork loin chops cut 1-inch thick

Cherry Barbecue Sauce (recipe follows)

Yields 4 servings.

In small bowl, combine all marinade ingredients and stir together.

Place pork chops in resealable freezer bag and pour in marinade, making sure to coat meat on all sides. Keep cold in refrigerator or ice-filled cooler for at least 4 hours and up to 24 hours.

Prepare enough coals for medium-hot fire or set gas grill to medium. Remove chops from bag and discard marinade. Grill chops over medium heat for about 12 minutes, turning once midway through cooking.

Remove from heat and serve immediately with the Cherry Barbecue Sauce.

CHERRY BARBECUE SAUCE

1 medium onion

3 garlic cloves

1 tablespoon chili powder

2 cups canned crushed tomatoes

1/2 cup freshly squeezed orange juice (about 2 oranges)

1/2 cup ketchup

1/4 cup light brown sugar

1 cup frozen sweet cherries

Yields about 3 cups.

In medium saucepan, cook onion over medium-high heat, until it softens, about 8 minutes. Add garlic and chili powder and cook 1 minute more. Add remaining ingredients and cook 5 minutes more, stirring frequently.

Transfer mixture to blender or food processor fitted with metal blade and blend until smooth. Transfer to plastic container and keep cold in refrigerator or ice-filled cooler until ready to use or refrigerated for up to one week.

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