



Building an Empire

New York culinary dynamo Lidia Bastianich travels to Toronto to promote all things Italian
BY ROSANNA CAIRA

She's been dubbed a force of nature — and with an empire that includes eight restaurants, six cookbooks, two Italian wineries and several cookbooks, who's going to argue with that distinction?

Lidia Bastianich, the doyenne of Italian cooking in America, travelled to Toronto recently as part of a promotional tour for her new line of Italian food products. The icon's claim to fame has been fuelled by a series of successful restaurants she owns in the U.S., including four in New York (Felidia, Becco, Esca and Del Posto) as well as Lidia's in Pittsburgh and Kansas City. She's also the star of her own cooking show as well as a bestselling author, with six cookbooks to her name, including *Lidia Cooks from the Heart of Italy* and *Lidia's Italy* — both companion books to the Emmy-nominated television series, *Lidia's Italy*. Fans of her cooking show were treated to a book signing, co-sponsored by The Cookbook Store, which

NOW AVAILABLE: Lidia Bastianich recently launched her new line of Italian products in Canada



offered face time with the culinary dynamo.

The down-to-earth chef recently added supplier to her long list of credentials, having developed and launched a line of eight different tomato sauces and pastas, which premiered in Canada at [All the Best Fine Foods](#) store in Toronto. According to Bastianich, the new product line was her attempt to allow fans, who have never had a chance to dine in her eateries, “a real flavour of the restaurants.”

Like many operators, Bastianich is inspired by changing trends. “Today's consumers are ever more educated,” she said. “Restaurateurs should not be intimidated by that. They should be stimulated and excited by the increasing sophistication of customers” who are inspiring innovation. “Embrace it, and put your special touch on it,” she advised.

When asked why Italian cuisine remains a favourite, the affable chef was matter of fact. “Italian cuisine makes perfect sense. It allows you to eat well, eat right and eat in season. The moment you try to make food into a medicine, it doesn't work. Italian food is about great, quality food and balanced meals,” she added, pointing to the abundance of healthy dishes such as soups, pasta and legumes.

Bastianich admits that, while Italian food continues to be popular, the cost of producing top-notch fare has skyrocketed, making success challenging for operators. Nonetheless, she maintains it should always be about quality offerings.

As for her other love — Italian wine — the celebrity chef believes that while New World

wines are growing at a fast clip, Old World wines will always hold a certain appeal. “You've got to remember only 12 per cent of Americans drink wines — that means 88 per cent of the population don't — there's a great opportunity to improve that figure. It's up to the restaurateur to educate, direct and do company research on what wines work best. Research, taste and direct them to it,” she said.

In addition to launching her line of Italian-produced pasta and tomato sauces — including the popular artichoke marinara — Bastianich also produces, along with her son, Joe, award-winning wines at Bastianich Vineyards in Friuli and La Mozza Vineyards in Maremma, Italy (available in Toronto via the LCBO consignment program through The Vine, Robert Groh Agency, [robgroh.com](#)).

And, if that's not enough to keep the beloved star busy, a year ago Bastianich, along with her son, celebrity chef Mario Batali and Italy's Oscar Farinetti, opened Eataly — the largest artisanal food-and-wine marketplace in New York City, transforming 42,500 square feet of space in the Flatiron District into the city's premier culinary mecca. She's also passing on her passion for education through food and wine. As dean of the School at Eataly, she highlights a culinary curriculum that includes food and wine courses, demonstrations and lectures from well-known chefs as well as world-renowned food and wine producers. ●