

the accidental tourist

Learning Italian food, one obsession at a time

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

You have to be a particular kind of person to make the leap *New Yorker* writer and former fiction editor Bill Buford does partway through *Heat*. As an acquaintance of chef Mario Batali, Buford asks Batali if he can try working in the kitchen at Babbo, one of Batali's New York restaurants. Batali says yes, and Buford becomes a kitchen slave. But at some point, he becomes more than that, and not just because he moves up in the kitchen hierarchy; at some point, he quits his day job.

Nice work if you can afford it. Buford gets his fair share of ribbing from the rest of Babbo's kitchen staff, but it's a wonder this once soft-handed writer in a professional kitchen doesn't get more. It's to Buford's credit that he's completely game. He's mocked, bumped, burned and embarrassed, but he keeps coming back for more, and the story that results is a funny thing that sits somewhere between the inspired travelogues of Bill Bryson (for Buford begins as a stranger in a very strange land) and the accessible food journalism of Michael Pollan (minus Pollan's concern for the bigger ecological picture).

Buford is an easygoing read, for all his long sentences and digressions. He's also an entertainingly naive narrator, his observations those of an outsider hoping to find an inside place. He learns at Babbo how to be part of the kitchen, but eventually particular obsessions (the origins of polenta, a change in the pasta recipe) begin to drive him to further study. Fixated on these topics, Buford slowly, gently shifts his tone: About certain things, the student becomes the teacher. But when one topic is exhausted, another is always waiting to be

found. In the book's last section, Buford's fascination is meat. In a little town in Tuscany, he presents himself to a butcher, Dario Cecchini, whose shop "wasn't simply a butcher shop but a museum of Tuscan cooking." Dario does not care for "bizzness." Dario is



passionate and prickly, as apt to deny a customer a selected cut of meat as hand it over along with a quote from Dante, and his larger-than-life character, so thoroughly dedicated to the meat he prepares, infuses Buford's apprenticeship.

Toward the end of *Heat*, Buford begins to ruminate on the story of Caterina de' Medici, rumored to have taken Italy's food secrets with her when she left to become the queen of France. Maybe the myth is bunk, maybe it's true, but its interest for Buford is without question: "If I'm really to understand Italian cooking," he writes, in what may as well be a promise that *Heat* will have a sequel, "I need to cross the Alps and learn what happened next. I have to go to France." ■