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## The Staff Party: Red Bull, 6 Pigs, Barbie, Truffles and a Blowtorch

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Joe Formabalo for The New York Times

**BETTER LATE THAN NEVER** Staff members of the Spotted Pig at their belated holiday party at Del Posto.

By PETE WELLS  
Published: February 7, 2007

MARIO BATALI was supposed to cut off the pig's head.

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Joe Formabalo for The New York Times

Barbies frolic atop Ring Dings and Twinkies.

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Six roasted suckling pigs rested on hotel trays in the basement kitchen of Del Posto. Five had been stuffed and rolled into porchetta, but one was just for show, and at the appropriate hour, Mr. Batali would decapitate it. Where was he?

The occasion was a Christmas party for the staff of the Spotted Pig, the Greenwich Village gastropub with a Michelin star where Mr. Batali is the best-known investor. Given the economics of closing a restaurant for a night during holiday season, the Christmas party was put off until last Sunday, when it nearly coincided with the opening date of the Spotted Pig, three years ago.

Mr. Batali's clogs had not entered the room by 10 p.m., but his spirit — and its direct line to his culinary id — seemed to be everywhere. The cocktail hour had flown by in a whirl of deep-fried bacon, deep-fried Rice Krispies treats and deep-fried imitation crabmeat. Guests scooped Chex Mix from an enormous silver bowl. Behind the swinging doors, a chef was attempting to inject Tater Tots with spiced ketchup, but his syringe backed up and he sprayed a sous-chef with red droplets. (A plastic squeeze bottle was more successful and caused no collateral damage.)

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Joe Fomabaio for The New York Times  
The chef Mark Ladner brings out one of the six stuffed pigs.



Joe Fomabaio for The New York Times  
Red sauce made of Redbull and Starburst candy.

A uniformed waiter entered the kitchen, picked up a tray of martini glasses filled with irregularly shaped brown objects, studied it closely, and asked, "Chef, what is this I'm sending out?"

"Um, they're pork rinds and, uh, Cracker Jacks," said Mark Ladner. Mr. Ladner, tall, wry and laconic, is the executive chef at Del Posto. For this event, he had left his station in the kitchen upstairs to serve as the banquet chef.

As the 80 or so employees and friends of the Spotted Pig took their seats, Mr. Ladner began assembling the first formal course: whole roasted lobes of monkfish liver and whole roasted lobes of foie gras. Silver gravy boats held a sauce made by melting three bags of Starburst candy into two cans of Red Bull and seasoning with salt and pepper.

"It sounds kind of silly but it's actually quite good," Mr. Ladner said. The sauce, an early innovation of Mr. Batali's, glowed red-orange with a transfixing intensity and hardened as it cooled — "like plastic," Mr. Ladner observed cheerfully.

He left the kitchen for a moment, carrying a blowtorch. This was to ignite the grappa he'd poured inside two hollowed-out wheels of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. When the flames died, Mr. Ladner filled the wheels with boiled rigatoni, grated cheese, olive oil, butter and what the menu called "mad amounts of large chunk Black Truffle."

Employees of the Spotted Pig crowded around to learn what \$1,350 worth of truffles smelled like. "Ooh, Chef Ladner," said a woman, swaying like a tulip in an April breeze.

After the macaroni and cheese came two whole halibut ("entombed in nuts, twigs, dirt and dust"), the pigs and the dessert ("celebratory cake served with scantily clad babes"). The babes turned out to be Barbie dolls perched in a variety of acrobatic postures around a towering assemblage of Devil Dogs, Yodels, Ring Dings, Twinkies and other store-bought snacks. "It's mixed media," said the woman who'd made it, Nicole Kaplan, Del Posto's pastry chef. "Hostess and Drake's."

Back in the kitchen, Alex Pilas, the restaurant's banquet chef, placed a plastic pouch of broth into the cavity of the presentation pig. As other cooks watched him work, he delivered a short, impressionistic history of ancient Roman feasts.

"There was a tradition in Rome that they would cook animals and try to make them look like they were real," he said, tucking a coil of sausages into the pig's hindquarters. "They'd cook a peacock and put the feathers back on. Other parts of the animal would be stuffed with other roasts. Partridge. Pigeon. Dormice. Whatever."

Mr. Batali still wasn't there. He had been trading e-mails all night with one of the Spotted Pig's owners, Ken Friedman. There was a "family situation" keeping him at home, Mr. Friedman explained, flipping through messages on his BlackBerry, a number of which were Mr. Batali's updates on the Super Bowl score.

In the end, Mr. Ladner did the honors, showily honing a carving knife before sawing through the pig's neck and puncturing the pouch that had been secreted inside. Out rushed a torrent of broth. The audience members moaned, cheered and took snapshots with their cellphones.

Mr. Ladner said he was satisfied with the dinner's progress. Other flourishes had been discussed, but he had no real regrets.

"We were going to buy some finches and have them fly out of the pig," he said. "But we thought

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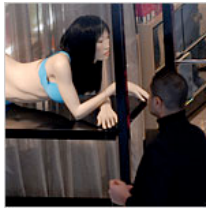
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