

March 4, 2010--

Acclaimed chef Mario Batali sits at the north end of the Packer Schopf Gallery on West Lake in Chicago. He is wearing an evergreen vest and orange Crocs and playing guitar with eighth blackbird, the Grammy-winning classical sextet based in Chicago.

This is the world premiere of eighth blackbird's "Learn to Crawl," arranged by Wilco drummer Glenn Kotche.

One wall of the gallery features embroidered porcelain plates and coffee cups made by Vietnam native Diem Chau. The Lake Street L rumbles by, creating a discordant rhythm for the progressive musicians.

Everyone knows this vibe is as unique to Chicago as Batali's Italian flair is to Greenwich Village.

The 150 or so people in the room paid \$250 each to attend last week's benefit for eighth blackbird. The group is a nonprofit; donations support its performances, recordings and commissions for compositions.

After the one-hour concert, the crowd moved to the Publican on West Fulton, a few blocks away, for a five-course meal prepared by Batali and award-winning Chicago chef Paul Kahan.

During a pre-dinner champagne reception, the Publican's slightly sweet pork rinds made their way around the room. The culinary highlight was the Publican's Spanish mackerel, served with eggplant and a wonderfully bitter wood sorrel. Batali's gnocchi ran a close second.

Batali, 49, and Kahan, 47, met in 1999 when they were spinning records at a Food & Wine party in Aspen, Colo. The magazine had named Kahan one of its "Best New Chefs" for his creations at his Blackbird restaurant on West Randolph.

"There was a Violent Femmes record," Kahan said during a break, after the fourth course of bollito misto (cotechino sausage, smoked turkey and pork belly).

"Was there really?" asked Batali, sitting nearby. "My musical taste is all over the place."

These guys are hardcore music fans.

A jazz record collector, Kahan once was a guest DJ at the late Sonotheque dance club in Ukrainian Village, which was co-owned by Donnie Madia, now his partner in

the Publican, Blackbird and avec restaurants.

Kahan and Madia named their latest Wicker Park restaurant, Big Star, after the Memphis rock band led by Alex Chilton.

Batali's Web site features a playlist ranging from Bela Fleck to Ali Farka Toure. The site includes ironic foodie choices: Guns 'n' Roses' "Appetite for Destruction," the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Blood Sugar Sex Magik" and the Rolling Stones' "Goat's Head Soup."

"It's the perfect record," Batali declared. "But there were 12 great Stones records. Three great Buzzcocks records. And four great Clash records."

In 2002, Batali performed a 20-minute, spoken word piece from Filippo Marinetti's Futurist Cookbook, the 1932 book that blended gastronomy with radicalism, during an eighth blackbird concert at Lincoln Center in New York. That collaboration led to a 2007 benefit for the group at Kahan's Blackbird.

The blackbird connections are serendipitous, Kahan said.

"They are fans of our restaurants," he said. "They gave me all their CDs. I liked them. People that like the arts embrace food as an art or a pleasure."

The ensemble takes its name from the Wallace Stevens poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The group formed when they were undergraduate students at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio. They relocated to Chicago in 2000.

The evening's menu was matched with eighth blackbird songs.

The group played the piece "Spam," but the chefs didn't serve Spam. Batali's first course was actually antipasto (culatello di babbo, salami piccante, hot lardo bruschetta).

Batali allows his staff to play music in the kitchen during preparation, but not during service.

"It's too complicated a world to have people not thinking of the job at hand," he explained. "But during the day, we listen to music all the time. It depends on the person in charge. A lot of times it's salsa. Whatever keeps people moving and joyous about their task."

Batali's musical adventure began as a high school sophomore in Yakima, Wash., when he picked up a ukulele and tuned it as a guitar. He grew up on a steady diet of jazz.

"Brubeck, Bird, Miles, Coltrane. That was what my dad [a former Boeing engineer

who now owns a Seattle meat-curing shop] listened to," he said. "We didn't think it was important, like 'Everybody hold on, here comes the music.' We just always had it on."

"For me, it was Pete Seeger, all the folk stuff," Kahan said. "My dad [who ran a Chicago deli] loved [jazz pianist] Ahmad Jamal. He used to love singing James Taylor songs. Nothing wrong with that."

Batali admitted he was "very uncomfortable all day" before his guitar performance.

"All it took to play with eighth blackbird was counting," Batali said at the end of the evening. "Except that I blew one E string on my big guitar solo. But, no one noticed except for me and the entire band."