



TAILS UNEXPECTED
Massimo Bottura, whose restaurant in Modena, Italy, ranks second on the World's 50 Best list, at Atelier in Havana. The chef is teaming up with Enrique Olvera and Andoni Luis Aduriz on a new venture in Cuba.

On a Tweet and a Prayer

What happens when one world-famous chef challenges another to collaborate on a new restaurant in Cuba? They descend on Havana without a plan. Then a third top chef shows up and turns the dream into reality.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NACHO ALEGRE

ON NOVEMBER 8, 2014, Mexican chef Enrique Olvera sent an impetuous tweet that ricocheted around the food world. Olvera is the father of modern Mexican cuisine, a national icon whose restaurant empire now ranges from haute tasting menus to fast casual burgers. His flagship restaurant, Pujol—a black-walled, clublit, food-pilgrimage site in Mexico City—regularly invites guest chefs from abroad, pioneers of cutting-edge cooking like Andoni Aduriz, whose restaurant, Mugaritz, outside San Sebastián, Spain, is currently sixth on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list (Pujol is 16th). In November, Aduriz cooked for two nights with Olvera—the burly, boisterous 40-year-old Pujol chef in his kitchen alongside his cerebral, whispery friend. Despite divergent personal styles, they found a comfortable groove. “We should do a project together,” said an effusive Olvera after shots of mezcal had been poured.

“But I choose the place,” said Aduriz, in a playful mood. He thought for a moment, spinning the globe in his head. “Havana, Cuba,” he said, picking a random spot on the map. (“Why I said Havana, I don’t know,” he later recalls. “I could have said Madrid, Barcelona, Milan.”)

Olvera seemed to be enjoying himself. “Sure, let’s do it,” he said.

“You don’t have the balls,” teased Aduriz.

And so, the tweet: “In a stroke of fortune @pujolrestaurant and @Mugaritz have reached an agreement to open a restaurant together in Havana, Cuba,” Olvera tapped out on his phone.

“You don’t tell a Mexican he’s got no balls—that he’s a coward, a *chingón*,” recalls Aduriz.

Congratulations poured in (“Exciting news.” “Fascinating and unexpected.”), followed by offers of on-the-ground help. “I told Enrique we need to go slowly,” says Aduriz, “take the temperature first.”

Six weeks later the U.S. and Cuban governments announced the return of full diplomatic relations, signaling a new era for the island after half a century of Cold War isolation. “It was as if we’d foretold it,” says Aduriz. How could they not follow through on that tweet?

Then last summer a third chef, Massimo Bottura, signed on to the Cuba project after carousing one night with Olvera. Italy’s most prominent contemporary chef, whose Osteria Francescana in the Parmesan and balsamic belt currently ranks second on the World’s 50 Best list, brought renewed excitement to the hypothetical restaurant. In this age of culinary cross-pollination, no partnership at that level had ever been attempted. “If three important chefs want to do something together, it’s big news,” says Aduriz. “When you put it in Havana, suddenly

the news becomes *very* big.”

By September 2015, details had begun to emerge: The restaurant might be called Pasta, Tapas, Y Tacos. “We will go on an expedition to Cuba in the first week of December,” Bottura told an Italian food site. There seemed to be substance, at last, to Olvera’s tweet.

Cuba’s tightly controlled economy might in fact be the last place on earth anyone would think to launch a restaurant. With salaries averaging \$24 a month, small entrepreneurs hustle for survival, while big business is largely in state hands. Communism remains entrenched and private enterprise is rigidly regulated. Though the new U.S. Embassy reopened in Havana last summer, the 55-year-old embargo across the Straits of Florida endures. For now, only certain sectors are open to foreign investment. Hospitality is not among them. While tourism is booming, the state maintains a monopoly on hotel ownership; many are run by a corporate subsidiary of the Cuban military headed by Raúl Castro’s son-in-law.

Restaurants, meanwhile, were entirely state-run until 1995, when the first *paladares*—supper clubs, run from private homes—were permitted. Originally these mom-and-pop operations couldn’t serve coveted proteins like seafood or beef, or feature live music or a bar. They were allowed to professionalize only in 2010, when the number of authorized seats jumped from a dozen to 50. For the first time, a single



PLATS DU JOUR
Top row, from far left: Schoolgirls in old Havana; view of the Malecón from El Apartamento, a contemporary art gallery; Bottura at restaurant Atelier.

Cuban operator could hold multiple licenses, pour liquor freely, hire anyone—not just family members—and open in a nonresidential space.

An explosion in private restaurants followed—there are now an estimated 4,000 across the country, up from the 250 reported in 2000. But with a dearth of trained cooks and cooking equipment, even resourceful *cuentapropistas* (as Cuba's small entrepreneurs are known) find running a restaurant a daily struggle. "All the things a chef needs to be successful are missing in Cuba," says Douglas Rodriguez, a Cuban-American chef from Miami who has led nine culinary tours to Cuba in the past two years. "If you walk into some of these restaurants and see how they prepare things, it's shocking," he says. "Cuba, culinarily, is behind 50 years."



ON THE TOWN
Clockwise from left: A bartender at El Floridita; the dining room at El Floridita; Aduriz (left), Cuban official Mario Escalona Serrano, Bottura and Olvera; staircase at Wilfredo Prieto's studio.



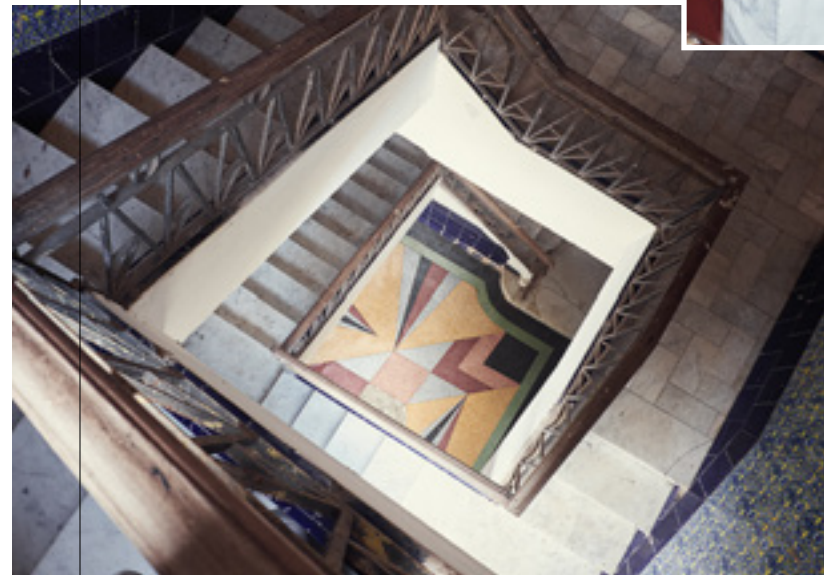
EVEN SO, in early December, three of the world's most famous chefs—dreamers, big thinkers, high-concept game changers—are in Havana, following through on a lark, seemingly oblivious to practical roadblocks. "We like a challenge," says Aduriz, early in the trip. Bottura, who arrives a day after the others, discovers that Olvera has not lined up any meetings for their first morning in Havana. The manic, jet-lagged Italian might kill a few hours strolling by the sea along the windswept Malecón, but with just three days in the country there's no time to waste. By 10 a.m., Bottura has arranged an appointment with Wilfredo Prieto, an internationally esteemed Cuban conceptual artist. A serious contemporary art collector, Bottura often creates dishes inspired by pieces he loves.

Inside Prieto's airy studio, a pristine, pastel-hued apartment hidden behind a crumbling facade, the artist opens his laptop to share images of his monumental, often fleeting, work—of a truck he encased in concrete in Milan, a table he tied to a hovering helicopter in a park in Madrid, the empty "sad circus" tent he erected in Havana near the new U.S. Embassy. Prieto is transforming a landmark home nearby into a studio space open to the public. "It could be very interesting to build a restaurant there," says Bottura.

The chef and the artist talk of Cuba's transitional phase. "The door is open if you have a nice cultural, philanthropic approach," says Prieto. "If you are a big company, with a very capitalist tack, maybe not. It's a very delicate moment right now."

Bottura has lately been consumed with philanthropic work, partnering with the Catholic Church on a soup kitchen—the Refettorio Ambrosiano—launched at Milan Expo last spring. The idea, like the Cuba trip, began with a somewhat quixotic pronouncement. "I'm working on something with Pope Francis," he'd said two years earlier. From last May through October dozens of his most prominent chef friends (including Olvera and Aduriz) turned leftover ingredients into meals for the homeless, fashioning imaginative cuisine from scraps. With the Milan venture deemed a success, plans are now underway to export the concept to Modena, Turin, Zurich and perhaps even Rio de Janeiro's favelas during the Summer Olympics.

Couldn't some variation of the concept work in



GREENER PASTURES
Clockwise from left: A steer-drawn cart at Finca Marta; Bottura in old Havana; Fernando Funes Monzote, the agronomist at Finca Marta; the dining room at La Guarida restaurant. Above right: A classic taxi in old Havana.



Cuba, too, wonders the Italian chef aloud—merging food and art, say, in a hybrid space?

“So what exactly is our idea?” asks Bottura a few hours later, finding Olvera and Aduriz in their hotel lobby. Though only Bottura has visited Cuba before (a brief sojourn to cook for cigar importers at a banquet for 400 guests), Olvera is the only one of the three with the sort of relaxed resort restaurant originally proposed, a seaside spot in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. He is also, it turns out, the least invested in getting something done quickly. “Maybe we open in five years,” he says.

This stretch of December, when the three chefs could all get away, happens to coincide with Olvera’s wife’s 40th birthday. He’s decided to celebrate in Havana this week, inviting 22 friends along. “Some things take priority,” he says. He plans to immerse himself in the city. “I want to understand this place on a personal level.” Though at the outset Olvera seemed to take the organizational lead, it turns out he has arranged no appointments at all.

Bottura, quietly fuming, explains what he’d discovered with Prieto during their impromptu chat. “The idea of creating a cultural project might be very interesting,” he says.

“We can do something extraordinary,” says Aduriz, picking up the thread, “a social and cultural revolution, a beautiful dialogue. And then on occasion we can also drink a mojito. There’s time for everything.”

THE CONVERSATION continues at the Italian Embassy later that afternoon, where Bottura and Aduriz (they see little of Olvera during the rest of the trip) outline their new plan to a high-ranking diplomat, Tancredi Francese.

Even at the height of the Cold War, Italy and Cuba maintained strong cultural ties. Italian architects designed much of the national art school Fidel Castro built on a former country club golf course in central Havana (in an iconic photo, Che and Fidel are pictured playing golf there in combat fatigues). Italians were among the first tourists lured to Cuba’s all-inclusive sun-and-sand resorts, built along Varadero beach 90 miles east of Havana during the so-called special period—the regime’s mad dash for cash flow that immediately followed the Soviet Union’s collapse. Bottura’s nationality seems fortuitous; a top chef from New York would not be likely to find as warm a welcome in Havana.

“The last thing any of us need is a new restaurant,” Aduriz tells the diplomat, as the three men sip *ris-tretti* at a long polished-wood table. “If we’re going to do something, why not do something important?”

“We’re behind you at the embassy whatever happens,” says Francese.

As it happens, an Italian avant-garde movie director, Marco Bellocchio, is being honored in the city this week with a film festival retrospective. Galleria Continua, an art gallery based in San Gimignano, Italy, has also just opened a nonprofit branch in Havana in a decayed Chinatown theater. The next day, inside that soaring contemporary art space, Bottura wanders, awestruck by a massive work by Cuban artist José Yaque—a sculptural cyclone of unspooled film reels and wrecked theater

chairs—imagining possibilities. Aduriz strolls beside him, taking everything in. Harmonized voices singing the Cuban national anthem, translated into Mandarin, accompany a film projected on a balcony wall. “It could be interesting,” says the Italian, “to bring farmers in here.”

Outside, standing in the rain, he tells Aduriz, “I would love to do events in the gallery. We can involve the ministries of culture and agriculture. They’re going to understand right away we’re not here to speculate.” The chefs later learn that the Cuban Ministry of Culture signed off on a like-minded experiment two years ago, launching with dreadlocked pop star Equis Alfonso the Fábrica de Arte Cubano, a mixed-use music, art, food and drink complex inside of an abandoned olive oil factory.

After just two days in Havana, it seems Bottura has stumbled on a path to doing business in Cuba that might actually work. (Seat-of-the-pants solutions are not uncharacteristic for the chef. “Massimo gets his energy from constantly putting himself in a precarious position, on the cusp of falling off the cliff,” Bottura’s wife, Lara Gilmore, later says.) The government, which is backing cultural projects from international architects, appears to be on the lookout for name-brand partners in sync with the socialist system. Sir Norman Foster is designing a ballet theater, Jean Nouvel is working on an art storage facility. “They love cultural exchange, cultural interchange, anything to do with cultural understanding,” notes Mark Entwistle, a former Canadian ambassador to Cuba.

The Ministry of Culture official Bottura and Aduriz meet the evening after touring the Chinatown gallery certainly seems open to the ideas they are peddling. We are sitting in a small conference room as Mario Escalona Serrano, the low-key economist heading the ministry’s music and performance division, explains the government’s work upgrading theaters and concert halls. “We’re looking for partners to add food and drink,” he says.

“Very good,” says Aduriz, jumping in. “But I have one question: Do you understand who we are?”

“You are chefs, right?” replies Serrano.

“Massimo has one of the best restaurants in the world,” says Aduriz. “I’m also pretty well known. And we have a Mexican chef with us who is an incredible talent. We have an idea, which is very particular, to do something together in Cuba.”

“Can we get something on paper?” wonders the government man. Even with official support for whatever comes next, the chefs will eventually face the practical difficulties of preparing, sourcing and serving food in this country. But for the moment, their future in Cuba seems alive with possibility.

“Sometimes you can’t find butter or chocolate or cream,” says longtime private restaurateur Enrique Núñez after lunch one afternoon. “But we find a solution.” His *paladar*, La Guarida, is among the oldest and best known in Havana, a magnet for visiting VIPs. (Jack Nicholson, Queen Sofia of Spain and Beyoncé have all dined there.) The restaurant, which

opened with 12 seats in 1996, serves smoked marlin tacos, suckling pig and lamb tikka masala. It quadrupled in size in 2010.

The growing restaurant sector has strained Cuba’s beleaguered food supply. The country imports some 70 percent of its food, much of it destined—along with the local agricultural output—for government stores. With no accessible wholesale market, chefs and restaurateurs rely on these sources. “You’ve got to be pretty agile running a restaurant,” says Entwistle. “Either you get what you need from retail shops—there’s lots of stuff but it comes and it goes—or you need to be petty criminalized and find it some other way.” Many restaurants fill gaps in their pantry by smuggling in ingredients from abroad.

Though there’s a limited farm-to-table sector emerging, from a few growers around Havana, there’s no steady supply chain. Even basic staples can be hard to find. But La Guarida’s search for quality ingredients became a bit easier last year when an organic farm—Finca Marta, on the edge of the city—began thrice-weekly deliveries. “It’s a very nice farm run by a very smart guy,” says Núñez, “a doctor in agricultural science.” After meeting the foreign chefs, Núñez puts in a call to arrange a visit.

The farm, tucked deep in the bush at mile 19½ off the highway out of town, turns out to be an agrarian paradise—with yapping dogs, honeybee hives, a few horses, a steer-drawn cart. No buzzing machinery or mechanized vehicles disturb the pastoral setting as we pull up, on the day the chefs are due to fly home. Among terraced arugula, eggplant and cherry tomatoes, Bottura’s gears start to turn. “My God, this place is authentic,” he says.

Fernando Funes Monzote, the agronomist behind Finca Marta, arrives late, wearing rubber boots and overalls. He recently spent a month visiting a dairy farm in Modena, Italy, run by a close friend of Bottura’s; he hopes to build a cheese-making facility to produce Cuban Parmesan and to welcome agritourism groups, serving breakfast or lunch. “We’d like to transform the whole area,” he says. The chefs exchange contact info with Funes on their way out—“*Mucho gusto*, great to meet you”—Aduriz promising to send books for the library Funes is adding to the farm.

Back in Modena a few weeks later, the Italian chef looks back on the group’s Cuban adventure. Already things have begun to evolve. The Tuscan partners behind Galleria Continua have reached out about events in their Havana space. “They’re ready,” says Bottura. “They want us there.” The farmer too has been in touch. “We’d like to help him create a restaurant,” says the chef. “Kilometer zero, all about local products, closing the circle there on the farm.”

An Italian company involved in construction in Cuba has also offered to help. “The rumors are spreading,” says Bottura. In 36 hours in Cuba he’d turned a DOA project around. “We’re not in any rush,” he says. “But we have something here, and most importantly, we’ve got good energy behind it. Maybe it was destiny that Enrique had no plan.” ●

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—DOUGLAS RODRIGUEZ



HIGH WINDOWS
The Havana studio of artist Wilfredo Prieto, who advised the chefs on doing business in Cuba. “The door is open if you have a nice cultural, philanthropic approach,” says Prieto.