



THE EYE HAS TO FEAST

Chef Massimo Bottura finds inspiration for Osteria Francescana's Michelin-starred menu by blowing up traditions of Italian cuisine—and in his own world-class collection of contemporary art.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTEO IMBRIANI



LOVE ACTUALLY
The drawing room of Bottura's home features a rug by Robert Indiana. The pigeons on the bookcase are from Maurizio Cattelan's *Tourists* series (1997). Opposite: The chef in front of a recent addition to his collection, a painting by Ugo Rondinone (2000).

ITALIAN CHEF MASSIMO BOTTURA is putting the finishing touches on one of his newest creations—“Beautiful Psychedelic Veal Not Flame-Grilled,” as he calls it—the meat cooked *sous-vide*, encrusted in ash and showered in a riot of sauces. “The plating is ‘fake casual,’” he says. “We use color like Damien Hirst in his spin paintings.”

A pioneer of modern Italian cooking, Bottura, who has worked with Ferran Adrià and Alain Ducasse, possesses both a deep respect for local traditions and a drive to keep blowing them up. The names of

his dishes—“Memory of a Mortadella Sandwich,” “All the Tongues of the World”—read like placards in a surreal gallery show, which makes a lot more sense when you understand just how immersed he is in fine art. With his American wife, Lara Gilmore—a former Hampshire College semantics student and aspiring artist, now her husband’s collaborator—he’s built a rich cultural life in his hometown of Modena, a city in Italy’s Emilia-Romagna region, 90 miles north of Florence. Along with its much-lauded avant-garde cooking, his flagship restaurant—Osteria Francescana, tucked away on one of the city’s quiet

cobblestone blocks—also boasts one of the finest contemporary art collections in the gastronomic universe. “We built our restaurant to feel like our home, Massimo and Lara’s place,” says the chef. “Twelve tables, small rooms where I can talk with my guests and show my respect.”

Just inside the entrance hangs a dramatic work by the late Mario Schifano, his Technicolor *World Map*, with borderless continents bleeding into each other. Jonathan Borofsky’s *Half a Sailboat Painting*—literally half a framed painting—leans on the floor near the front door, a sly jab at the prosaic seascapes that adorn so many tourist trattorias. The chef’s bisected homage, his “Half a Cheesecake” dessert, emerges from the kitchen and travels down a corridor past a pair of Ólafur Eliasson landscapes and a trio of stuffed pigeons by Maurizio Cattelan, which are perched above a *trompe l’oeil* trash bag cast in bronze by British artist Gavin Turk. A Matthew Barney print hides in the bathroom nearby, around the corner from Francesco Vezzoli’s *La Vie en Rose* series, 19 black-and-white stills of Edith Piaf with embroidered tears—bought 14 years ago for \$16,000 and now worth roughly 10 times that.

The art—the stuffed birds and Turk bag, in particular—is a perennial conversation starter, and for Bottura, that’s exactly the point. “There are people who don’t get it,” he says. “I’ve heard them whispering, ‘Can you believe it, they left the garbage on the floor.’” The chef gravitates toward pieces that hit you in the gut and, like his best dishes, get you thinking—and, hopefully, smiling. “We are not in a location where nature can inspire us,” he says. “We are in the middle of a medieval city. Art became our landscape of ideas.”

While the rotating work at the restaurant is impressive, it’s just the beginning of Bottura’s collection. “Massimo likes big pieces,” says his wife at their home one evening, surrounded by a Platner table and



ON THE MENU
In Osteria Francescana’s front dining room, a series by Ceal Floyer, *Ink on Paper*, and, in the next room, Carlo Benvenuto’s *Table with Fruit—Red*. Right: Cattelan’s pigeons cast shadows above Gavin Turk’s *Bin Bag*.



a Cone chair—and by monumental tableaux by David Salle, Robert Longo and Vik Muniz, among other contemporary art stars. A newly arrived rug by Robert Indiana covers the marble floor in the living room, where more Cattelan pigeons stand watch atop bookcases lined with art folios. Down in the basement hangs another recent purchase, a target painting by Ugo Rondinone, so large they had to carve out a section of the ceiling to accommodate it. “We’d been looking for one of these for 15 years,” says the chef. “When I saw it come up for auction I didn’t even think whether or not it would fit.”

Bottura and Gilmore are as comfortable navigating the Venice Biennale as they are the London awards for the World’s 50 Best Restaurants. (Osteria, which earned its third Michelin star in 2012, took third place last year.) In their conservative, affluent hometown, the couple inhabit a cosmopolitan bubble of artists, collectors and gallery owners—a surprising number of them childhood friends of the chef’s.

The original Osteria Francescana—Bottura kept the name when he took over the space in 1995—was a casual tavern popular with artists who had studios nearby. Bottura inherited that crowd as he began chasing fine-dining glory. “The first people we met were local artists,” says Gilmore, who moved from New York shortly before the opening.

As the restaurant’s reputation grew, so did the artistic caliber of its clientele. Emilio Mazzoli, whose contemporary gallery is down the street, adopted the place as his entertaining canteen, bringing in an A-list roster of Italian and American photographers, painters and sculptors. He encouraged Bottura to start collecting, first with some of his less exorbitant pieces. Soon the artists were bringing friends. Cindy Sherman showed up with David Byrne one night—he’d been playing a concert nearby. Bottura, as obsessive about music as visual art, ran home to get a stack of albums for the musician to sign.

“My first passion was soccer and then music,” says Bottura, at home in the study where he stores his record collection, some 12,000 indexed albums. At one end there is the raw Southern rock of his youth—the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd, LPs he spun as a teen when he deejayed house parties in Modena; at the other, the classic jazz—such as Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker—that he now plays at the restaurant.

“I never, ever throw anything away,” says the chef, who turns 52 in September, grabbing a new album off the shelf—Ella Fitzgerald’s 1958 birthday concert in Rome, remastered on 180-gram vinyl. He breaks the cellophane seal, slides the record onto his 1972 Transcriptor turntable, the same kind displayed at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. As jazz impresario Norman Granz introduces Fitzgerald to her fans in halting Italian—“*Buongiorno, signore e signori*”—Bottura flicks through a stack of albums signed by other idols who have dined at his restaurant: Lou Reed, Jackson Browne, Michael Stipe.

Gilmore, meanwhile, is in front of her laptop at the dining room table, channeling her husband’s voice as the unofficial ghostwriter of his upcoming cookbook, *Never Trust a Skinny Italian Chef*, coming from Phaidon this fall. “Massimo will have a sleepless night, get up, write all these ideas down,” she says.



PAINT IT BLACK
Bottura’s “Black on Black” dish is an homage to Thelonious Monk: ash-encrusted black cod in a sauce of squid ink.

“It’s my job to make sense of them all.” For inspiration, she’s been thumbing through the pile of books stacked beside her, among them the first volume of Bob Dylan’s memoirs, recounting his early years in New York. “Massimo loves Dylan,” she says before reading a passage aloud, capturing the mood—if not exactly the era—of their first meeting in the city.

IT WAS THE EARLY ’90s. Bottura had come to New York in search of himself. He was temporarily disillusioned with cooking, having closed his first restaurant, a modest trattoria on a country road just outside Modena. Gilmore had been dabbling in acting and painting and gallery work. Circumstance brought them together at Caffè di Nonna, a low-key Italian restaurant in Soho where he eventually cooked for a time and she tended bar.

That period will figure prominently in their hybrid book—a combination memoir, cookbook and coffee-table art object. Though food is the focus, there will be few recipes—just 50. Instead of using a food photographer, they persuaded two serious artists to contribute: Stefano Graziani, best known for his taxonomic groupings of trees, flowers, museum dioramas and other quotidian images, will supply atmospheric

shots, while the dishes will be captured by Carlo Benvenuto, who shoots minimalist still lifes with an old Hasselblad.

Benvenuto was among the first of Mazzoli’s artists that the couple collected together. Their latest acquisition from him, an enormous double-exposed shot of fruit on a supersaturated red table, hangs in the restaurant foyer. In an intimate dining room around the corner, one of the artist’s rare forays into sculptural work sits on a pedestal: three solid Murano crystal drinking glasses. “It’s a 25-cent glass that wants to be a piece of art,” whispers Bottura during lunch service one day. “It’s about light, vision, silence.”

The chef has been serving me dishes from his culinary canon, riffs on classic fare from the Emilia-Romagna region, along with some of the edgier creations that first put his restaurant on the gastronomic map. There is his famous “Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano in Different Temperatures and Textures,” an almost-20-year-old dish featuring a single ingredient in a variety of hot, cold, crunchy or fluffy preparations. His “Eel Swimming Up the Po River” comes lacquered in *saba* with burnt-onion-powder “mud”—and plays off the blue-tinged aerial image of Rome by Grazia Toderi that hangs on the wall near my table. A sweet-and-savory dish



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—MASSIMO BOTTURA



of Lambrusco-steamed *cotechino* sausage follows, with an airy wisp of zabaglione on top. The meal finishes with “A Potato Waiting to Become a Truffle,” its crunchy skin filled with sweet custard showered in black-truffle shavings, elevating the modest tuber, he says, as Benvenuto has those everyday glasses. Bottura’s food and plating go through stylistic phases, like Picasso moving to Cubism after his Blue Period. “I think I’m in a very straight period now, the minimalist look,” he says. “We make everything look simple, but actually there are three days of work behind it.”

On an excursion later, we drive out to Hombro Organic Farm, a dairy run by a childhood friend, Marco Panini, who supplies wheels of Parmesan to the restaurant. When they were in their early 20s, the two men ran the events program at a Modena nightclub that Bottura co-owned with a few other pals from the town. They called it the Harley Club, telegraphing their passion for American motorcycles. Panini booked live acts—cabaret and comedy shows—while Bottura worked the decks late-night as the DJ. “It was like a Village Vanguard, the same spirit,” says Panini, as we wander the grounds.

If he hadn’t become a chef, says Bottura, he might have easily fallen into another creative field. Lately he’s been channeling his energies into designing his own watch, part of a series commissioned from chefs by a Swiss company. Bottura’s design will be black on black—in tribute to Thelonious Monk (whose sessions for the Black Lion label are legendary) and to his own monochrome dish inspired by the jazz pianist, featuring black cod served in a puddle of squid ink. “It’s a watch inspired by a dish inspired by jazz,” says Bottura.

The next day, artist Giuliano Della Casa, an early fan of Osteria Francescana, welcomes us into his studio. For years he’s been painting the menus with whimsical watercolors in exchange for food and



WHAT’S COOKING
A view into Bottura’s home kitchen. Above left: The music room has a 1972 Transcriptor turntable. Opposite: The entrance foyer is lined with art, including works by George Condo and Wolfgang Tillmans.

drink. Bottura embraces a barter economy. As we explore the cluttered space, full of works in progress, he trades dinner at the restaurant for an illustrated book a visiting collector brought in for Della Casa to sign. Then he makes another impetuous purchase: a “golden tortellini” table, with a polished wood slab in luxurious walnut, which the artist designed back in 1968. “I’m going to put it in the restaurant—bravo, bravo!” says the chef, barely able to contain his excitement. “We’ll put a gold tortellini on top.”

Bottura, a restless soul and compulsive collector, is constantly moving his artwork around as new

additions arrive, shifting pieces from restaurant to home and back again. He dreams of one day stumbling on a Lucio Fontana painting he can actually afford. “For me, he’s the perfect expression of the northern Italian mind,” he says of the artist, whose biggest pieces fetch many millions. “With a simple gesture he tells you everything.”

In the meantime, Bottura will continue collecting as he always has—with specific locations in mind. “We’re not choosing the art,” he says, “the art is choosing us. The pieces are choosing the walls where they hang.” ●