



POST-MODENA

Italy's food is bound by tradition. Its most famous chef isn't.

BY JANE KRAMER

The words “Italy” and “new gastronomy” were an oxymoron when the Modena chef Massimo Bottura opened the Osteria Francescana, in 1995, and started creating the dishes that would turn him into a luminary of the culinary avant-garde. Take Black on Black, his tribute, by way of squid ink, katsuobushi, and a black cod, to Thelonius Monk. Or Camouflage, his nod to Picasso, with a civet of wild hare “hiding” in custard under a blanket of powdered herbs and spices. Today, dishes like those have earned him three Michelin stars, raised Francescana to third place on San Pellegrino’s famous list of the best restaurants in the world, and put Italy on the map for the kind of travellers who prefer to eat their spaghetti and meatballs at home.

Bottura gets emotional thinking about food. His friends know this, because he thinks out loud. Very loud. It happens when he starts to imagine a recipe—inspired, perhaps, by the arrival of a new Big Green Egg cooker or a wheel of Parmesan that he’s been aging for fifty months, but just as often by, say, a Robert Longo painting or some vintage Lou Reed vinyl or a line he suddenly remembers from Kerouac or Céline. He describes the process as a kind of synesthesia, where the worlds he loves start coming together in his head, and he has no choice but to call someone with the news. It could be a childhood friend, a couple of blocks away in Modena, or another chef, thousands of miles from Italy, depending on who, in his words, “has to hear this.” People listen. They hear the beginning of a loud, breathless, unstoppable recitation, and know that, as one friend put it, “It’s Massimo, cross-pollinating again.” Bottura calls it, “Tasting my creativity.”

The first time I heard Bottura “thinking,” I wondered if he was angry—or, worse, bored. I was wrong. I got used to Bottura’s shouts. I tried to think of them as bardic. I would wait for him to jump up from the breakfast table—“the best place to catch him focussed,” his American wife, Lara Gilmore, maintains—grab his cell phone, disappear into the library, where he keeps a gleaming nineteen-seventies Transcriptors hydraulic turntable, a pair of MartinLogan speakers, and his vast collection of CDs, tapes, and records, and, with the music blasting, begin to shout. I would watch him brake his motorcycle in the middle of a Modena street, dig for his phone, and, to the

accompaniment of honking horns, begin to shout. I learned a lot about food, listening to Bottura think, though I would happily have skipped the night he punched a number into his phone and yelled, “*Senti questa!*”—“Listen to this!”—while driving a Mercedes at perilous speed down the autostrada to Reggio Emilia and, at the same time, leaning low into the windshield to take pictures of the moon rising under the arch of a Santiago Calatrava bridge. That was unsettling, given that I had hoped to get to Modena alive that night and sample the Eel Swimming up the Po River on Bottura’s “Sensations” tasting menu, and even to beg a chef’s reprise of Black on Black, which had been “retired,” like the number of a star pitcher.

Bottura thinks of his dishes as metaphors. They tell stories. His eel—cooked sous-vide, lacquered with a saba sauce, and served with creamy polenta and a raw wild-apple jelly—refers to the flight of the Estense dukes to Modena in 1598, after Clement VIII seized their capital at Ferrara and claimed its eel marshes and fisheries for the Church. Camouflage—with its custard of foie gras, dark chocolate, and espresso foam—comes from a conversation between Picasso and Gertrude Stein, as a camouflaged truck rolled past them on Boulevard Raspail, in 1914. (Picasso, who had never seen camouflage before, cried, “Yes, it is we who made it, that is cubism.”) And the short story that inspired Black on Black is about a French chef who turns out the lights when a group of irritable gourmets sit down to dinner, telling them, Eat with your palates, not your eyes. Bottura thought of that story late one night in his library, listening to Monk in the dark. He decided to create a recipe that would honor Monk, but he couldn’t turn out the lights at Francescana. So he filleted the cod; seared its skin in dehydrated sea urchin and an ash of burned herbs; flipped it over to nestle in a layer of slivered root vegetables and ginger (for “spaghetti”); and poached it in a dried-tuna broth, blackened with the squid ink. At Francescana, it came to the table as a beautiful deep black circle in a bowl. The “lights” went on when you picked up your knife and fork and cut into the cod’s bright white flesh. “Black and white,” Bottura says. “Piano keys.”



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"You're getting close. This is the gift shop."

Bottura is one of a small, far-flung brotherhood of exceptionally gifted and inventive chefs who have deconstructed, distilled, concentrated, and, with uncommon respect, reconstructed the flavors of their own traditional cuisines. They are in constant touch. They text, they tweet, they call. They travel across the planet to share their ideas and secrets and techniques—the thermal immersion circulators, micro-vaporizers, precision smokers, and freeze dryers. They convene in August for the MAD weekend—the Noma chef René Redzepi's annual gathering of the tribe in Copenhagen. They fish and hunt and forage and cook together at wilderness outings like Cook It Raw, gastronomy's extreme sport (which Redzepi once, possibly to his regret, described as Boy Scout



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camp). They meet at the food writer and impresario Andrea Petrini's Gelinaz! (don't ask) cook-offs and riff on the history of one dish. This year, the destination was Ghent and the dish was a classic nineteenth-century meat-and-vegetable timbale; Bottura sent his brother Paolo, who is a car dealer, to be "Massimo Bottura" and present his version, along with a video of the two men trading clothes at the airport—to make the point that no chef can claim to own a recipe, even one he has invented. They recount their most catastrophic gastronomic adventures to enraptured foodies at places like the New York Public Library, where Bottura was last "in conversation" with two of the American brothers, Daniel Patterson, of the San Francisco restaurant Coi, and David Chang, of Momofuku.

He told a story about trying to cook seventy reindeer tongues sous-vide, in a bath of ashes and olive oil, on the floor of a small hotel bedroom somewhere in the forests of Lapland, with the thermal circulators set so low that he had to spend twenty-four hours on the floor with them, waiting for the molecular miracle that would transform those thick, rubbery lumps into tempting morsels. This fall, in an exhibit at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, you can see the "black meteorite" sculpture of carbon ashes, ground coffee, flour, and egg whites in which he had cooked a veal tongue—an image that came to him while thinking (out loud) about the artist Lucio Fontana's mid-century series "Concetto Spaziale."

Bottura was born in Modena and grew up in a big house not far from the restaurant he owns now. Modena is a small city in Emilia-Romagna, half an hour northwest of Bologna in the Po River Valley, which is to say in the country's breadbasket, a source of agricultural wealth that is the envy of all Italy. The Po and its web of tributaries—Modena sits between two—account for a food tradition that includes the country's only authentic Parmesan (Parmigiano Reggiano), its best prosciutto and culatello, its richest sausages (try pheasant stuffed with cotechino), its darkest Vignola cherries, and its finest balsamic vinegars, some of which were already on Modena's tables when Cicero, writing the *Philippics*, described the colony, by its Latin name, as *Mutina firmissima et splendidissima*. Modena is steeped in praise, history, and satisfaction. Bottura says that



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when he opened Francescana the local *borghesi*—few of whom actually thought to eat there—were instantly suspicious, convinced that no one could cook better than the way they had always cooked, meaning exactly the way their mothers and grandmothers, and all the mothers before them, had. This, of course, could be said of anywhere in Italy, a country so resistant to culinary experiment that grown men will refuse to eat their wives' cooking and go “home” for lunch instead.

So it's probably more shocking than surprising that, at first, Modena—home to a twelfth-century university and cathedral, to Italy's West Point, to the Ferrari founder and the Maserati factory, to a concert hall, an opera house, seven theatres, three good museums, and a foundation with one of the best photography collections anywhere—was immune to the lure of gastronomic refreshment. The problem was pride as much as provinciality. “When you taste a Bottura dish, the flavors you thought you knew become deeper, wider, longer,” his friend Massimo Bergami, the dean of the Alma business school, at the University of Bologna, says. “He's building on the genuine identity of Italian cuisine. But, to most Italians, identity has to do with borders, with saying, Go no further. Our towns were walled once, and the ones with the most ‘identity’ within their walls have often preserved it obstinately, defensively, in a very static way.” It seems that, while Spain was ready for a Ferran Adrià, Denmark for a René Redzepi, and Brazil for an Alex Atala, Modena was not quite ready for a Massimo Bottura, who said, “I want to donate my dreams to people,” in the same breath as he talked about the tortellini his mother, Luisa, made.



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Luisa Bottura cooked all day. She didn't have to. Her own mother had helped found, and run, a very successful fuel company, dealing first in wood and then in coal, and when Luisa married Alfio Bottura, who came from a rich landowning family, he took over her family's business, switched to diesel fuel, and made another fortune. But she could usually be found in the kitchen, where, with the help of her mother and her maid, she cooked for a daughter and four sons, their hungry friends, a brother-in-law and a sister-in-law who had moved in, and anyone her husband wanted to bring home for lunch or dinner except his mistress—"he had two 'wives'" was the local term.

Bottura was the youngest son by six years. He says that his brothers would come home from school, find him watching the women cook, and chase him around the kitchen with whatever makeshift weapons were at hand. He took to hiding under the kitchen table, where, being five or six and always hungry, he "discovered my palate" by devouring the bits of tortellini dough that fell to the floor from the women's rolling pins. It was instantly addictive, he says, like the taste of his wife's cookie batter dropped from a wooden spoon. "That kitchen, under the table, was my safety place," he told me. "I remember the yellow of the pasta on a warm day, with the sun streaming through the window. I could see it through the slats. A perfect color. I thought, Good for tagliatelle, too."

In 1988, after a trip to Southeast Asia—"my first exotic vacation," Bottura calls it—ended with a bout of food poisoning in Chiang Mai, he thought about how soothing a bowl of his mother's "birthday tortellini" would be, and began to work on a dish that he called the Tortellini Are Walking on the Broth. Two layers of broth, thickened with a seaweed agar "to create the movement of water, and six tortellini bobbing between them, in a layer of warm broth, crossing the Red Sea, going home." His wife, Lara, describes it as "Max's ultimate provocation of a town where no one would say, 'I'm better than *la mamma*.'" Eventually, he made his *compromesso storico* with Modena. He called that dish Noah's Ark, because every family's tortellini tradition was in it. Bottura says, "My thought was you don't let tradition bind you. You let it set you free. The broth of Noah's Ark is the broth of many mothers. I put all their traditions together in one pot—duck, pigeon, guinea fowl, chicken, veal, beef, pork, eel, and frog's legs, with



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some kombu seaweed from Japan, for a wise cultural contamination—and make the broth. When all those flavors are concentrated, the meat comes off the bones, the bones are roasted, and each handkerchief of tortellini is filled with one of those broth meats.” I asked his mother, who is eighty-nine, what she thought. “Massimo’s cooking is fantastic,” she said. “But I cook better.”

Bottura began to cook for his friends when he was still in high school. They were a notorious crew—“six of us, plus twenty worshippers,” one of them told me, laughing—known as either the bad boys or the golden youth of Modena, depending on who was talking. They were all good-looking. They threw the wildest parties. They were into every Italian teen-age preoccupation—music, motorcycles, cars, soccer, girls, and clothes. (Bottura’s taste once ran to Gigli, Gaultier, and Moschino; now he’s happy in jeans, T-shirts, and a comfortable pair of New Balance.) “There were the serious, political kids, and there was us,” Massimo Morandi, a Modena businessman who is one of Bottura’s oldest friends, says. “Most of us came to school by public bus. O.K., I had a car—a Rabbit—but Max had his choice of cars. One day, it was his father’s gray Mercedes, the next his brother Andrea’s green Porsche, the next his brother Paolo’s black Saab. Cars like that, parked outside the school next to the teachers’ little Fiats, created a lot of envy. But Max wasn’t showing off; he was just being crazy.”

Bottura was also irrepressibly hospitable, like his mother. Whenever he and his friends were through partying for the night, they trooped to Luisa Bottura’s door for pasta. They called it the after-party. “It was never a problem,” she said. “My door was always open. I loved to watch them eat.” It wasn’t long before Max took over the three-in-the-morning shift in Luisa’s kitchen. “The atmosphere around Max was pure ‘Animal House,’” his friend Giorgio de Mitri, who owns the Modena arts-communications company Sartoria, says. “But when the playing stopped it was *aglio, olio, peperoncino*, and there was Massimo at the stove. He was very good at cooking fast.”



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Bottura's Pasta e Fagioli, a dish whose five layers pay homage to his culinary influences.



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There is some debate in Modena as to when Bottura became the serious cook he is now. His mother says, "In my kitchen." Morandi says on a camping trip, in the late seventies: thirty kids, a couple of tents, and, on the last night, "a celebration, with Max cooking a spaghetti carbonara so perfect that we all clapped." But Paolo Bottura knows that it happened when his best auto electrician left his dealership to open a restaurant. Paolo wanted the electrician back, wooed him, and, two years later, told Max that there

might be a restaurant for sale. It was a truck stop, really, in a village near Modena called Campazzo di Nonantola, but Max was at loose ends. He had finished high school with amazing ease, considering that he rarely studied. He had put in his obligatory year with the Italian Army stationed at home in Modena—and won so many titles for his base’s soccer team that no one stopped him when he took to driving in and out of the base, without permission, honking at the gates and calling, “Open up. It’s me, No. 1.”

He went to law school to appease his father, who wanted a lawyer in the family business. “I liked it, but it wasn’t the right place,” he says. “I didn’t feel that I was living my own life.” He was also working afternoons for his father. That ended when the two men fought over a commission that his father refused to pay, saying, “You sold too low.” Bottura told me, “I started screaming and never went back. I pictured myself waking up, every morning, foggy, fighting with my father over one cent per litre of diesel gas. I had no money. But I bought that falling-apart trattoria. I thought, Why not? I was already cooking for all my friends. I wanted to show that I could do it.”

Marco Bizzarri, who shared a desk with Bottura in high school and is now the president and C.E.O. of Bottega Veneta, says, “I was doing my military service, and I remember calling Max’s mother, asking for him, and Luisa saying, ‘He’s opened a restaurant.’ I couldn’t believe it. I was the blue-collar bad boy; my parents worked in a tile factory. But I had gone through life with Massimo. We had aced our French tests together, with Max reading from the book we were supposed to know and me mouthing the words and trying not to laugh. I knew Max could be anything he wanted. He was like a child, someone always growing, and you never knew what was coming next. But I never expected Campazzo. The truckers were still eating there, they were yelling at him, ‘What is this? We’re paying more but eating less!’ ”

It was 1986. Bottura was twenty-three and trying to transform a roadside trattoria where, by all accounts, the chipped glasses were as old as the trucks outside, and everything else was brown and muddy yellow except the hideous gold-painted metal food trolley that he wheeled around, pretending not to see his friends. Most of the bad boys were on their way to respectable lives, but their nights were reserved for the



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Trattoria del Campazzo, the consensus being that, wherever Max was, there would be a party later. His worst problem was the “entertainment”—an accordionist with a singing wife who came with the place and whom Bottura was either too timid or too kind to fire, until, after six months of forbearance, his friends gave him an ultimatum: us or them. Meanwhile, Campazzo was looking prettier. Bottura’s girlfriend at the time was studying interior design. She hung curtains and replaced the old tablecloths with creamy linens. Her mother filled in, nights, washing dishes, and Luisa Bottura came every day with her maid to make the pasta, while Massimo got busy at the stove and started riffing on their old Modena recipes. “Economically, it was terrible,” he says. “But the food got better.”

A few months after Campazzo opened, a woman from the village knocked on the door, asking for the new owner. Her name was Lidia Cristoni. She had been cooking in Modena for thirty-five years, many of them at what was then its best restaurant, but she was losing her sight and could no longer negotiate the city’s streets. Bottura installed her in his kitchen that morning, and, two days later, saw to it that she had an operation on her eyes. She had planned to stay for a year or two, and stayed for seven. “She was my second mother-mentor,” Bottura says. “A master pasta-maker. She could handle a hundred and sixty eggs a day.” I asked Lidia about Campazzo one day last summer, when Bottura and I visited her at the clinic where she had just had heart surgery, and was already complaining about the food. “Massimo had a fantastic will,” she said, while Bottura dug into the lunch she had refused to finish. “But he was so nervous about the restaurant. He was grinding his teeth, he wasn’t sleeping, he wasn’t eating—he was down to sixty kilos. I gave him salamis, I told him, ‘*Mangia! Mangia!*’ or I’ll leave. One day, the health people showed up to say that we couldn’t use any eggs at all because of salmonella. Max didn’t know what to do, but I did. I told the inspector that I had twenty fresh eggs from my own hens. He said, ‘Give me ten,’ and left.”



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Herb nests for Snails in the Vineyard, a dish of snails with mushroom and truffle.



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The truckers left, too, once Bottura had replaced the electrician's menu with wild-arugula salads, soft-boiled egg yolks on oysters splashed with vinegar, and wine that actually came in bottles. The crowd got younger. "It was like having a big family dinner every night," Lidia said. "But once the service ended it was a bordello, because Max kept a little apartment above the restaurant, and everyone went upstairs. One New Year's Eve, we were a hundred and fifteen people. Max suddenly disappeared. Everyone

was asking, 'Where's Max?' I covered for him. He was at my mother's house. He had walked over with a big dish of her favorite panna cotta—the kind with a base of caramel and fruit. She was ninety-two, and still making tortellini, but she couldn't do panna cotta anymore. He was the one who thought of her, alone on New Year's Eve."

Giorgio de Mitri once described Bottura to me as "like a sponge, because he has that rare ability to absorb influence and at the same time to stay absolutely himself, absolutely original." With Lidia, the influence was traditional Modena cuisine. Next came the basics of French cuisine, adapted to Emilia-Romagna's bounty, and Bottura's teacher was a French chef named Georges Cogny, who had married a woman from Piacenza and eventually moved his pots and pans to Farini, a peaceful village in the Apennines, where he opened a restaurant called Locanda Cantoniera. Bottura ate there a few months after he bought Campazzo, tasted Cogny's demi-soufflé of chocolate, and asked if he could watch him cook. For the next two years, he spent every Sunday and Monday, when Campazzo was closed, driving two hours into the mountains to learn.

"I was starting to feel like a real chef," he told me, toward the end of a sweltering day in late July. We were in Farini, at a chefs' ceremony in memory of Cogny, who died there in 2006. "That was the gift Georges gave me. I remember the day it happened. He was doing oysters, wrapped in pancetta and sautéed, and asked *me* to taste them. 'Too salty,' I said. He wanted to know what I would do. I told him, 'Crunchy pancetta, but keep the oysters raw.' He said, 'Massimo, your palate is going to take you far.'"

In 1989, a year after his lessons with Cogny ended, Bottura opened the Harley Club—named in honor of his new purple Springer—for the after-parties that had quickly become much too big for an apartment above a trattoria. The club was next to his motorcycle mechanic's shop in Modena, a few blocks from the city's historic center. The neighbors complained, but it was otherwise a wild success. The best d.j.s and rock groups in Emilia-Romagna heard the buzz about this improbably cool place in fusty Modena and booked their nights. On Thursdays, well-known comedians came to hone their standup routines. Bottura himself was on a killing schedule, cooking lunch and dinner at Campazzo and then, as soon as the last dinner guest was gone, heading to the Harley to cook again. He says he had never been so happy.



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Bottura met Lara Gilmore in New York, in the spring of 1993, on the day they both started working the two-to-midnight shift at Caffè di Nonna, a hitherto uninspired Italian restaurant in SoHo, with Gilbert behind the bar, dispensing wine and cappuccino, and Bottura in the kitchen, cooking. Bottura had fallen in love with America, despite (or possibly because of) an “amazingly weird” trip, in 1991, to Arkansas, where he and a friend from home encountered a biker by the name of Ed at a Domino’s Pizza, endured a session at Ed’s favorite tattoo parlor (Bottura chose a winged buffalo head, which by now looks like a bunny with serrated ears), drank like “Harley men” (beer and Jack Daniel’s), and were stiffed on an order of custom bikes (made from parts of a 1968 white-and-yellow Harley classic), which were nowhere in evidence six months later when they flew from Italy to Ed’s mechanic in Daytona Beach to claim them. The experience did not discourage Bottura—not, at any rate, enough to keep him from moving to New York for six months to “taste its food, look at its art, listen to its music, and reignite my passion.” He was turning thirty-one, and had decided to close the club, put Campazzo on the market, and use the money to open a different kind of restaurant. He was “looking for energy and inspiration to tell me what that restaurant would be.” His one problem in New York was coffee. “I was desperate for good coffee” is how he describes the odyssey that took him from the middle reaches of Columbus Avenue, where he had rented a one-room walkup, to SoHo, where, on his search for the perfect espresso, he noticed an Illy coffee sign in the window of a restaurant at Grand and Mercer, walked in, ordered a double, and the next morning had a job.



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Gilmore was twenty-four and living with a drummer in a sublet on the Lower East Side. Her parents lived in Bedford, in Westchester, where her father, Kenneth Gilmore, had just retired as the editor-in-chief of *Reader's Digest*. She had gone to Andover, studied art and theatre at Hampshire College, with a year off, painting at the New York Studio School—after which she had interned at the Kitchen and then at Aperture, the photography-book publisher. When she met Bottura, she was at the Actors Studio, and auditioning for parts. “Lara was my dream of America,” Bottura says. She was smart, beautiful—with dark eyes and light-brown hair—and, to his surprise, knew Italian, having spent some summers studying art in Florence. Bottura, in his New York incarnation, was sporting a goatee, a pair of round blue John Lennon glasses, and a Kangol hat. Gilmore thought he looked “very cool,” and a few months later invited him to a Wooster Group play. “I didn’t understand a thing happening on that stage,” he told me. “I slept through most of it. But Lara took over my education. She opened the world of the avant-garde to me.” His Modena girlfriend, who had been living with him in New York, left him. Gilmore and her drummer parted. The party had moved to Bedford.

“They would arrive at my house late Saturday night, after the Nonna closed,” Lara’s mother, Janet Gilmore, told me. “My husband and I would wake up, Sunday mornings, and find all these wonderful young people sprawled out on the sofas, the chairs, the floors, the beds. In the summer, we always rented a big family house on Block Island. Later, when Max came, he took over the kitchen there. If we were out of wine, he would marinate the fish he’d caught in white tea. If there was nothing for lunch, he’d improvise and make everybody’s children pizza. He was so full of energy, like an active volcano, flowing ideas.”

Late that summer, Bottura flew home to sell Campazzo and start looking for the right place in Modena for a new restaurant. Gilmore surprised him there on his birthday, moved in with his old girlfriend—they had become friends—and the two women opened an American vintage-clothing store. “Max was happy,” Gilmore says, “but I was thinking, Isn’t it time we had a conversation?” Two weeks later, the French



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chef Alain Ducasse, who was in Modena tasting balsamic vinegars, sat down to lunch at Campazzo. When the service ended, he walked into the kitchen and invited Bottura to cook with him at the Hôtel de Paris, in Monte Carlo. Bottura went, and Ducasse became his new mentor, the one with the exemplary kitchen battery and the scrupulous *mise en place*. Gilmore visited once. She and Max had their conversation. “I asked him what to expect,” she told me. “He said something appalling, like ‘Gee, I don’t know, there are so many beautiful women out there I haven’t met.’” She left without saying another word.

Bottura couldn’t believe she was gone. He left Monaco to find her. Two weeks later, he tracked her down in Bedford. They flew back to Modena together, and in October of 1994 Bottura rented a small building, on a quiet, cobblestoned street, that had once been an inn named Osteria Francescana, after San Francesco, the neighborhood’s thirteenth-century parish church. He restored it, opened in March, and, in July, he and Gilmore married. The groom cooked dinner for two hundred guests. The bride did the flowers and the tables. Bottura was thrown into the swimming pool (the bad boys, again). “And I had my revenge for that awful Ducasse moment,” Gilmore said, when she showed me a picture in which she digs into the wedding cake with both hands, scoops out a large chunk, and rubs it into her husband’s face. “It felt great.”

For the next three years, Gilmore and Bottura led separate lives, with Lara at di Mitri’s company, Sartoria, putting out an arts magazine called *CUBE*, and Max at the restaurant, cooking. “The first year, we were full,” Bottura says. “Everyone I knew came, especially my friends who had helped paint it—they ate free.” The second year, we were empty. I was ready to close.” Bottura’s father was not forthcoming, and, in the event, Bottura wouldn’t have asked for help. (By the time his father died, he had sold his business and transferred nearly all his property to his mistress; Bottura didn’t receive a cent.) It was the Gilmores who saved Francescana. “Well, we believed in Max,” Janet Gilmore told me. “We saw that he had a vision. It was a very modest sum we advanced, and we knew it wouldn’t be used for a Ferrari.”



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Francescana survived. Bottura began to experiment more. “I was making ‘foam’ with a blender,” he says. “It was more foamy than it was foam, but it was different. I thought my cuisine was very interesting.” It must have been, because Francescana was getting a reputation abroad. It wasn’t at the cutting edge of molecular gastronomy—Bottura didn’t have money for that kind of equipment anyway—but he was creating small miracles of taste with the equipment he had. In 1999, Ferran Adrià came to Modena. He tasted Bottura’s food—with the result that Bottura spent the next summer in Spain, working at El Bulli. Gilmore, who at the time was pregnant with their second child, says, “Max didn’t bring the fireworks back from Spain, just one siphon”—the secret of which turned out to be nothing more alchemical than two small cartridges—“but what he did bring back was a new way of thinking about Italian ingredients, at every station of the kitchen.”

Bottura says the experience changed his life: “Right away, I realized that it wasn’t just about technique. Before, I had made my foam in a blender, and the only difference now, with the siphon, was that I could make foam airier and better. What changed me was the message of freedom that Ferran gave me, the freedom to feel my own fire, to look inside myself and make my thoughts edible. There were three of us interning with him that summer. René Redzepi was there from Copenhagen—that’s how we met—and there was this older hairy guy from Rome, who had a bar near the Trevi Fountain. René and I were moving from one station to another, doing cold savory, doing pastry with Ferran’s brother, Albert, learning so much, and trading reflections on how to eat. But the guy from Rome, all he wanted to learn was how to make Parmesan ice cream. Ferran was pissed. He put him to work, hard labor: sixteen hours a day with his hands in ice water cleaning sardines, or peeling pine nuts. Late one night, the three of us were standing looking at the sea. It was one o’clock, and we had been working non-stop since eight-forty-five in the morning. We were so tired that we were almost asleep on our feet. The next morning, the Roman came in, strangely happy. He said, ‘Guys, I’m back to Rome. Fuck you!’ An hour later, he was gone.”

Adrià was Bottura’s last mentor, and Bottura thanked him in a new recipe for *pasta e fagioli*. The dish is layered. The bottom layer is a *crème royale* of foie gras, cooked with



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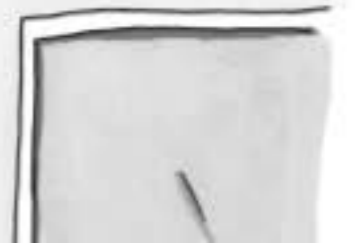
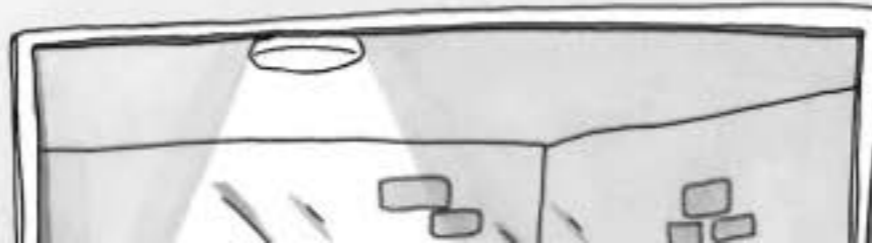
pork rind, in honor of Ducasse. The next three layers are for his grandmother, his mother, and Lidia; he calls them “compressed tradition.” Lidia’s layer is radicchio and pancetta; Luisa’s is a cream of borlotti beans; and *la nonna’s*, “where the pasta should be,” is Parmesan rind cooked with more beans and sliced to a chewy crunch. The top layer is for Adrià, an air of rosemary so delicate and light that it’s almost invisible; you know it’s there by the burst of flavor on your tongue. When I asked Bottura how he did that, he said, “Water is truth”—distilled and vaporized.

I ate at Francescana three times (four, if you count the night I was waiting for Bottura—reading a book and having a glass of wine in one of its three small dining rooms—and a feast materialized at my table). The first time, Bottura served me “Sensations” (thirteen dishes that take you on a trip through Italy, from the Alps to the boot and across the Strait of Messina to Sicily), along with a couple of dishes from his “Classics” tasting menu (recipes so popular that he can’t retire them), which he thought I should try. Three hours later, I got up feeling as light as if I’d eaten no more than a simple pasta and a plain green salad—the reason, as Bottura put it, being that “my mediums are holy water, a little olive oil, and *basta!*” His *crèmes royales* have no cream. The foam in his Memory of a Mortadella Sandwich (which is not a sandwich) is whipped with distilled mortadella “water,” concentrated in a Rotavapor. The cotechino in his ravioli loses its fat in the process of being steamed and chilled.

FROM THE ARCHIVE
APRIL 2, 2012



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I learned some interesting things from Bottura. I learned that he made risotto broth the way his grandmother had made it, with Parmesan crusts, simmered in water until their flavor leached. The night I came home to Umbria, where I was spending the summer, I sliced the crust from some Parmesan in the fridge, tossed it into a pot of water, and served my husband the best risotto Milanese either of us had ever eaten. A week later, I made Bottura's home version of a splendid tagliatelle ragù that had appeared the night I was waiting for him at Francescana (its meat softened, as I'd suspected, in the restaurant's thermal circulator). I didn't have a circulator. I didn't even have any veal cheeks or veal tongue or beef tail or marrow, nor could I possibly have hoped to find them at my country co-op. I was comforted by the fact that Bottura had said to relax, to use whatever was in the house, because the important thing was "no tomato" and the secret was: Don't grind the meat; wait until the ragù is cooked, and then do what the grandmothers did—chop it or tear it apart. Taking him at his word, I defrosted a couple of veal scaloppine and a chunk of beef filet, dusted them with a little flour, browned them in olive oil, and cooked them in leftover wine for the minute it took the liquid to evaporate; crisped some bits of fresh sausage and pancetta in a hot pan; made the soffrito—onion, carrot, and celery stalk—and, for marrow, chopped and browned a handful of lardo; put everything in a big pot with rosemary and bay leaves from the garden and left my ragù to simmer in beef broth for two hours, over heat so low that the flame on my burner kept going out. I ignored the homemade-tagliatelle part, opened a box of fettuccine, and, while the pasta cooked, tore the meat with my fingers. Bottura was right. It made all the difference.

Bottura and Gilmore work together now. She is his house skeptic, his sounding board and critic, his editor and, often, his ghostwriter, the one who translates those loud, bardic bursts of creativity into something focussed and coherent, strips the stories he tells so well of any traces of what could be called the local operatic style, and shapes them for publication. He never neglects to say how much of the magic surrounding Francescana is hers. "She introduced me to a deep conceptual world, she



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gave me a critical point of view, a way of seeing,” he says. “She told me, ‘We are contemporary people. We don’t have to cook in a nostalgic way.’ ”

Gilmore is rarely at the restaurant. If you see her there, it’s usually in the afternoon, arranging fresh flowers, or at a table with friends, eating—never at the door, greeting customers, or, notepad in hand, taking orders like the traditional Italian chef’s wife. When we met, last summer, she was polishing Bottura’s eponymous third book, which has the working subtitle “Never Trust a Skinny Italian Chef.” The book, which comes out next year, is one of new gastronomy’s art-of-the-chef tomes—photography, autobiography, history, food philosophy, and, usually reluctantly, recipes—that rarely make it from the coffee table to anybody’s kitchen, the photographs being too beautiful to subject to stains and oil splashes, and the recipes too complex for anyone without, as in Bottura’s case, a hanging eel skinner and deboner or the right syringe for injecting aged balsamic vinegar into a bar of almond-and-hazelnut-lacquered foie gras on a Popsicle stick. Gilmore was organizing its chapters, which have names like “Working Class Heroes” (Bottura’s tribute to the foods of Italy’s traditional peasant larders) and “Image and Likeness” (for the transformative effect of art, music, literature, and travel on his cooking). She was also choosing the photographs of plated food from a stack that had just arrived from the Milan artist Carlo Benvenuto, whose picture “White Tablecloth and Glasses” was one of the first pieces that Bottura bought for what is now an impressive collection of contemporary art, much of it American, and is the first thing you see when you walk into Francescana. (Benvenuto describes himself as “the guy Max calls in the middle of the night, throws out some clue as to what he’s thinking, and asks how an artist would interpret that, what kind of food would an artist eat, walking around with that thought.”)

Gilmore enjoyed the work. The hard part was transcribing the recipes that Bottura dictated, on his feet and thinking rapidly out loud, without much patience for specifics. They were trying to adapt a few of his recipes for home kitchens, and the closest they came to arguing while I was with them involved a simple kitchen utensil. “Beat everything together,” Bottura said, toward the end of one recipe. “Beat with what?” Gilmore asked him. “Just say ‘Beat,’ ” Bottura told her. “But with what? A spoon? A



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whisk? A mixer?” She needed to know that. “Will you just say ‘Beat!’” Bottura shouted, and left the room. A few minutes later, he was back, looking contrite. “A whisk,” he whispered. Gilmore opened her laptop and wrote it down, trying not to smile.

Today, most of Modena wants to eat at Francescana. The problem is getting a reservation. Bottura has brought the world there, and the world books tables in advance. He is now the city’s most famous citizen, like Pavarotti before him. The mayor loves him. Strangers hail him on the street. The cook at his local pizzeria named a pizza for him. Bottura, for his part, has become the very visible face of Emilia-Romagna’s foods. He blends, and sells, a line of aged balsamic vinegars. He appears at nearly every event having to do with agriculture, from the culatello celebration we went to at a villa near Parma (complete with haystack seats and a pen of sleek black piglets) to meetings at the two agriculture schools that he has persuaded the government to revive by adding cooking courses, “to give young farmers a sense of belonging to the community, a sense of the connection between what they do and what the rest of us eat.” He works with dairy farmers to renew their herds of the area’s vanishing Bianca Modenese cows, and with chicken farmers to switch their production to its heritage Romagnola hens. He makes videos about old eel fishermen on the Po who have lost their livelihood to riverine neglect, and, because of his fame, and the charm of the stories he tells (they’re like Italian folktales), he has shamed the regional politicians into allocating large grants to restore fishing to the river.



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FROM THE ARCHIVE
SEPTEMBER 24, 2012



Last year, when a hundred-mile swath of the province was devastated by weeks of earthquakes and more than three hundred thousand huge wheels of Parmesan were damaged, he offered his services to the Parmesan consortium, invented a recipe for *risotto cacio e pepe*, made with Parmigiano Reggiano instead of Pecorino, and dispatched it to cyberspace. The recipe went viral. Thousands of people bought cheese and cooked it. Six months later, nearly a million kilos of Parmesan had been sold, with one euro per kilo of the proceeds going to earthquake victims.

It's hard to keep up with Bottura. Giuseppe Palmieri, his estimable sommelier of thirteen years, says, "Max met me one night (he was having dinner at the restaurant where I worked), called from his car on the way home, and invited me to follow him. I'm still running. I love him, and, if you work with Max, to love him is essential." Bottura hires like that—fast, on instinct. His three head chefs, who take turns travelling with him, have been at Francescana since 2005: Yoji Tokuyoshi knocked at the door, "starving," on the last day of a two-week visa from Japan, was given a place to stay and a six-course feast that began with a leek-and-truffle tart and ended with a "hot-cold" *zuppa inglese*, and started working the next day; Davide di Fabio had just begun sending out applications when his phone rang and a voice said, "Hi, I'm Massimo. Come to my kitchen"; Taka Kondo arrived as a customer, ate lunch, and, before he knew it, was at the stove, making sauces.

Bottura's staff worries that, at fifty-one, he has been racing through maturity the way he races through Modena on his new Ducati. Enrico Vignoli, who studied engineering and now manages Bottura's office (and his micro-vaporizer), says, "Max's frenetic energy is a curse. If he stops, he dies." His daughter, Alexa, who is seventeen, reads Greek and Latin, and seems to have inherited his palate—he calls her "the queen of passatelli"—says, "My dad is always challenging me. Do better. Do better. It's like he challenges the guys in the kitchen. It's stressful, but it stretches you. He stretches himself most of all." Bottura has had some sobering wakeup calls. His brother Andrea died of cancer at forty, and not long ago he lost Kenneth Gilmore, whom he calls "my other father," to Parkinson's disease. His son, Charlie, who is thirteen, was born with a rare genetic syndrome and requires special care. What drives Bottura today includes a



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strong desire to secure the future for his family.

Next January, and with trepidation, he is opening a traditional Italian restaurant, in Istanbul, for Oscar Farinetti's Eataly chain, and is sending Yoji Tokuyoshi to run it for him. He describes the project as "introducing Italy to Turkey with a reflection on my past—on osso buco with risotto, on veal with a little sage, a little lemon." He has been sifting through offers to endorse everything from refrigerators to shoes. Back in July, I drove with him to Milan for a photo shoot for Lavazza coffee, at the Ambrosiana Library. When I left at eleven to take a walk, he was arguing with a woman from the company who had just informed him that his shoot was going to include a model. When I came back, half an hour later, he was smiling over a big pot for the photographer, with three Leonardo codices behind them. And there was the model—dressed, from her bondage stilettos and sexy black sheath to her chaste white collar and owl-rimmed glasses, as a Helmut Newton librarian about to engage in some seriously painful discipline—mincing back and forth with a stack of books for him to drop into the pot to simmer. Bottura suggested calling the shoot "Cook the Books," but he was overruled.

Toward the end of my last week in Modena, I asked Bottura about his worst moment as a chef. He answered right away: spring, 2009. He had his second Michelin star, and had just jumped to thirteenth place on the "world's best restaurants" list. People were flocking to eat at Francescana—not to mention cook there. And a lot of Italian chefs were jealous, or jealous enough to pick up the phone when Canale 5—Silvio Berlusconi's version of Fox News—called with invitations to appear on its nightly show "Striscia la Notizia" ("The News Slithers"), where they accused him of poisoning Italy with his "chemical" cuisine. "Eight million people heard this," he told me. "Alexa came home from school crying—saying, 'Daddy, is it true you're poisoning people?' I said, 'Alexa, no way! They're talking about natural things, things like soya lecithin and agar, things you find in every kitchen—even Nonna Luisa's.'"



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The truth is that everything that happens when you cook is chemistry. Anyone who has watched a steak char, or the broth in a risotto bubble away, or sugar in a couple of drops of water turn to caramel, knows this. But in much of Italy words like “chemical” still mean magic, science is heresy, and if you add postmodern or molecular to that virtual pasta pot they become political—codes for something foreign, dangerous, and, worse (Berlusconi’s favorite), Communist. They marked Bottura as a culinary terrorist, serving chemical weapons disguised as a new kind of Italian food to innocent Catholic people. Bottura is thin-skinned; I have heard him quote, detail by detail, a bad review in a restaurant guide from 2002. But “Striscia” was arguably much worse. “They had sent people to eat at Francescana who filmed my plates with hidden cameras,” he said. “After ‘Striscia,’ we had health inspectors there all day. Twice. I called my guys at the restaurant together, and I said, ‘If you believe in what we’re doing, stay. If you want to leave, you’re free to go.’ All of my guys stayed.”

Bottura wasn’t alone. The other important poisoners were Adrià and the British chef Heston Blumenthal. The difference was that people where they lived laughed. People in Italy stoked a debate about “authenticity” and “the health of Italy” that went on for months, and, of course, was nightly television fodder. It probably didn’t help that the well-known art critic and historian Achille Bonito Oliva, speaking in Bottura’s defense, called him “the sixth artist of the transavanguardia.” (The rest were painters like Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia.) But Bottura was thrilled. He likes to repeat those words. The irony, for him, lay in his obvious devotion to Italy and its food—and to the demonstrable fact that, whatever “chemistry” he had introduced, and whatever tastes he had incorporated from abroad, Italy was vivid in every dish he served at Francescana.

Italians have made a myth of all those mothers and grandmothers happy in the kitchen. They have lived (profitably) with the country’s revolutions in design—in fashion, in furniture, in everything from cars to espresso-makers—but “the way we have always cooked” remains their last defense against modernity. Four years ago, Bottura, having reinvented the grandmothers, added a selection called “Traditions” to his tasting



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menus. “I did it for the locals,” he told me. “It was an homage to the food they liked, a way to show that it could be improved, that it was O.K. to improve it.” ♦

