

THE TABLE

Food | By Lara Rabinovitch



Massimo Bottura Wastes Nothing

The Award-Winning Chef's **Soup Kitchens** Are Taking Over the World

The modernist Italian chef Massimo Bottura is famous for his provocative and inventive riffs on the classical cuisine of Emilia-Romagna. A palm-sized, green, red and white “chip” evoking just the “crunchy” part of the lasagna, for example; a deconstructed mortadella sandwich where the cured meat is served as a foam with pistachio powder and liquid garlic; a smashed lemon dessert called “Oops! I Dropped the Lemon Tart.” Bottura’s 22-year-old restaurant Osteria Francescana in Modena has earned three Michelin stars.

These days, however, Bottura is interested mostly in garbage.

For the past three years, Bottura, 54, has traveled through Italy and other parts of the world to establish his *refettori*—his artistic take on community soup kitchens. “It’s about culture,” Bottura explains. “If I didn’t read Joseph Beuys, if I wasn’t interested in art, if I didn’t love Ai Weiwei, I could never do this.” To call attention to our collective mistreatment of food—in the United States, for example, we throw away 40 percent of what we produce—the menus at the *refettori* are composed of items that would otherwise be considered waste. As Bottura’s wife and business partner, Lara Gilmore, explains, “We aren’t going to answer the question of how to feed the planet with more production. We have to look at what we’re doing with the food that’s already produced.”



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Top Left: Massimo Bottura has opened refettori from Italy to the Bronx. **Top Right:** Massimo working together with his staff at a soup kitchen in Brazil. **Right:** Bottura's refettori help combat food waste in countries like the US, which wastes 40 percent of its food annually. **Middle & Bottom Right:** Osteria Francesca, Bottura's restaurant in Italy, topped the World's 50 Best list in 2016. **Bottom Left:** Bottura's soup kitchens have salvaged 15 tons of food.





The first *refettorio* launched in 2015 at the Expo Milano, where the theme of the World's Fair was "Feed the Planet." Bottura enlisted the help of world-renowned chefs like Alain Ducasse, René Redzepi and Alex Atala to bring together his vision of what he calls "fighting waste through beauty." Designers, architects and artists helped remodel a theater donated by the Catholic Church into the Refettorio Ambrosiano. The soups and pastas the chefs prepared were served on china and with the principles of restaurant hospitality, including wait staff volunteers to serve the food. Over a period of five months the chefs transformed 15 tons of salvaged food like potato peels and day-old bread into 10,000 nutritious meals for the needy. The *refettorio* still operates today.

"We're not trying to save the world," Gilmore notes. "We're just trying to see if there's a small solution to a very big problem." It's a vision Bottura and Gilmore have consolidated into their not-for-profit organization, Food for Soul. With the help of corporate sponsorships and volunteers, they now run soup kitchens in Bologna and Modena for recent immigrants, single mothers and the unemployed. In 2015 they launched Refettorio Gastromotiva at the Rio Olympics, which featured art from Vik Muniz and dishes made with, among other items culled from Brazil's waste, banana peels—which Bottura smoked for a low-sugar sorbet. "I always keep the door open for the unexpected," the chef says with a coy smile.

The "unexpected" is what originally led Bottura down this pathway of social responsibility. The energetic chef leaped into action following the devastating earthquakes that struck Northern Italy in 2012 and damaged some of the 360,000 aging wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano (each weighing nearly 100 pounds)—a specialty of Bottura's region—with potential financial losses in the millions. He devised a recipe called *riso cacio e pepe*, a cheese-amped amalgam of classic risotto fused with the simple Roman pasta dish. Through social media, Bottura inspired thousands of people around the world to buy the damaged cheese and cook the risotto—with proceeds going to the earthquake victims. All of the Parmesan was saved.

This past June, Bottura and Gilmore launched Refettorio Felix in London, and, thanks to a half-million-dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, they will bring the concept to the United States, with several soup kitchens planned over the next two years, the first most likely in the Bronx, to be followed by others elsewhere in the country. And in November, Bottura's latest cookbook will be published: *Bread Is Gold: Extraordinary Recipes with Ordinary Ingredients* (Phaidon)—inspired by the world of waste. "The no-waste movement gets people back to the table and cooking," Gilmore explains. "We don't need to have caviar or lobsters—we can make delicious, extraordinary recipes out of very humble ingredients." ■



HOW TO BRING BREAD BACK FROM THE DEAD

Stale bread is one of the most commonly chucked items. Here are eight ways to repurpose it, inspired by Massimo Bottura:

Grill it for bruschetta.

Bake with veggies and eggs for savory bread pudding.

or, add a bit of sugar and fruit for a sweet bread pudding.

Toss with tomatoes for a panzanella salad.

Drown it in a ribollita soup.

Crush it for breadcrumbs.

Chop into croutons.

Fry slices into French toast.