



Revolution on a plate

Art is everywhere at Osteria Francescana, Massimo Bottura's restaurant in Modena, Italy: it's about sparking positive change, says the chef, collector, food activist and now hotelier, in conversation with Maïa Morgensztern

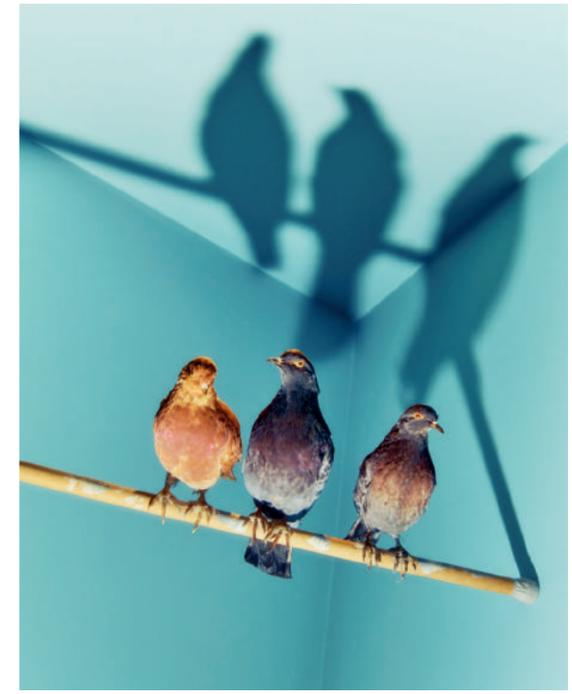
Photographs by Thomas Chéné

Artwork: Damien Hirst, *Beautiful/Sonic Disco of Love and Hate at the Gate of Hell/ Painting with Wicked Pools of Glorious Massimo Bottura Colour and Psychedelic Spin Painted Veil, Not Flame Grilled*, 2007. Household gloss on canvas, 2134mm (84in). © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved. DACS 2019





Osteria Francescana, with a partial view of Bosco Sodi, *Black Tondo*, 2011. Below, Duane Hanson, *Security Guard*, 1990. Right, Maurizio Cattelan, *Tourists*, 1997 (detail). Previous pages, Massimo Bottura and a Damien Hirst spin painting from 2007



Should I add some prosciutto?’ Fumbling around in his kitchen, Massimo Bottura, the chef behind the three-Michelin-starred restaurant Osteria Francescana, is making a snack. Assuming he is thinking aloud, rather than asking me for cooking advice, I pause for a moment to stare at a Cindy Sherman photograph in the hallway.

We have just arrived at the chef’s home in northern Italy, a few kilometres from Modena’s medieval city centre. The motor of his white Maserati is still warm in the driveway. Around me, art is everywhere. Works by Ai Weiwei, Joseph Beuys and Michelangelo Pistoletto are dotted all over the ground floor. Downstairs, Bottura happily poses in front of a large painting by Ugo Rondinone. He and his wife Lara Gilmore had been lusting after the work for so long that they didn’t think twice before raising a paddle when it came up at auction. On the way home, they just hoped it would fit somewhere in the house. It did not. ‘We had to dig into the basement to accommodate the painting!’ Bottura laughs. After only 48 hours with the chef, this comes as no surprise. The man once moved to New York, disheartened with the food industry, and his restaurant now ranks first in the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list. ‘*Marcia!*’ I had heard Bottura chant from the kitchen throughout the service at Francescana. It’s a motto the chef seems to apply to everything in life, and which could be translated as ‘Onwards and upwards!’

We move to the living room, a plate of fresh vegetables and prosciutto in hand, and sit on a purple sofa facing a huge sculpture by Allora & Calzadilla. A perfect view to start our conversation. »



The dessert 'Oops! I dropped the lemon tart'. Opposite, Casa Maria Luigia, Bottura's hotel

Art is everywhere around you: in your house, in your restaurant and in your new boutique hotel, Casa Maria Luigia. When did you first start collecting? Art and music have always been part of my life. I'm from Modena. At home, bel canto opera and 19th-century art formed the basis of our education. As I grew older, I started reading about impressionism, Fauvism, cubism, Futurism, etc. I wanted to learn how everything had evolved from one artistic movement to the next. Until I hit a wall. For me, art was all over after Duchamp. I wasn't planning on changing my mind until I met Lara in New York in 1993. She tried to pull me towards contemporary art, step by step. There was so much catching up to do, but I eventually discovered things I could not see before. Lara made the invisible visible, and we started buying works together.

Your collection includes work by Piero Manzoni, Duane Hanson, Maurizio Cattelan, Carsten Höller and Tracey Emin, to name a few. While this is a rather eclectic group, many of the works have a tongue-in-cheek undertone. Do you think humour is an easy way to draw people to art? Absolutely. At Osteria Francescana, we regularly have customers complaining about a rubbish bag

in the hallway. Gavin Turk's bronze-cast sculpture *Trash* is a playful way to begin a conversation, but the piece also marks the spot of our old kitchen. It was so small we had to constantly take the refuse out, sometimes during service. And look at where we are now. Most artworks enter the collection to tell their story as much as ours.

Beyond collecting art, the restaurant's menu is filled with dishes referencing specific works. Where does your inspiration come from? Inspiration comes from everywhere. I don't dedicate a specific time during the day to thinking: now is the time to be inspired. But, invariably, I come back to art because it has this capacity to quote the past while reinventing it. I am just adding a layer to the story. In 2012, I was invited to cook at Casa Italia, the country's official hub during the London Olympics. Damien Hirst participated in the festivities by loaning a spin painting to a fast-food restaurant. 'Beautiful, Psychedelic Spin-Painted Veal, not Flame Grilled' was my take on Hirst's collaboration. I used Chianina beef, not veal, rolled it in carbon ash and vacuum-packed it. Once cooked, it was completely black on the outside and perfectly pink inside, as if it had been grilled. This »

Photo: Paolo Terzi





was a nod to the so-called flame-grilled image of the fast-food industry. I finished the plate by spinning a tricolour sauce on, à la Hirst. More recently, I prepared a Mediterranean sole after reading about Alberto Burri's arte povera work. Art, design, music: most people don't pay attention, but everything is linked. You just have to look for these connections and make the story your own.

At Francescana, your art collection is clearly an inspiration. The dessert 'Half a lemon-tart' is a reference to Jonathan Borofsky's *Half a sailboat painting no. 2*, now at Casa Maria Luigia. What do the artworks in the restaurant have to say about your food? Look at Elger Esser's photograph of the Po River, which is hanging next to Bosco Sodi's burnt tondo. The works are begging you to ask: 'What was better, 30 years ago when the river was healthy and filled with fish for everyone, or now?' Bosco Sodi's cracked soil is screaming: 'Stop using chemicals, because I'm dying!' If we don't act now, our resources will eventually dry up. That's why I put those two pieces there.

This discussion carries on in the kitchen with two dishes: 'An eel swimming up the Po River' and 'This is not a sardine'. Surrealist wink to Magritte aside, the culinary echo reads as a clear warning. In the latter dish, you used eel from the nearby Po River, but if overfishing and chemical dumping continues, one day we might have to eat sardines instead. This could feel a bit patronising to diners. Is a restaurant the right place to start a debate?

I like to think so. I hope people who come to the restaurant have a good time, but I feel it is also my »



At Casa Maria Luigia, Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Go/Stay)*, 2006, and a partial view of Jonathan Borofsky, *Half a sailboat painting no. 2*, 1984. Opposite, Carlo Benvenuto, *Untitled*, 2013 (detail)



Previous pages, artworks: Carlo Benvenuto, courtesy the Artist; Galleria Mazzoli, Annette Lemieux, Helios and Goodbyes, 1994 (detail), 22 black and white photos, 108 x 180 inches. Courtesy Annette Lemieux, Galleria Mazzoli Modena Italy, and Mitchell Innes and Naah NYC.

Massimo Bottura
in the garden of
Casa Maria Luigia

‘It’s my responsibility to talk about wider issues. Art is a great way to start a difficult conversation’

responsibility to talk about wider issues. Art is a great way to start a difficult conversation. For example, the dish ‘Burnt’ alludes to a work by Glenn Ligon, *To Disembark*, which deals with slavery.

Ligon’s piece is itself inspired by a collection of texts by Gwendolyn Brooks. We’re going back to this idea of a layered past. How did you turn an installation of wooden crates into a soup?

I wanted to tell the story of African Americans who are still coping with ostracism, from discrimination to blatantly racist acts. I liked the idea of mixing Ligon and Brooks’s works, to make a sort of edible poem. The soup is black with an earthy taste, and the biscuit is burnt. It’s a dark dish commemorating dark days. Guests in our osteria are by definition privileged, and we can’t just brush away real world problems because they makes us uncomfortable. We need to reflect and give back – although you do not have to know that to appreciate the food!

Your activism goes beyond silent storytelling though. Sylvie Fleury’s sculpture *Golden Bin* sparked the birth of Food for Soul, a non-profit organisation promoting social awareness about food waste and hunger. How did that happen?

I bought *Golden Bin* in 2014, and had a revelation: garbage is gold. I realised we had to take an honest look at the food industry and speak openly about these issues. Milan Expo was coming up, so it was the perfect opportunity to redefine what people think is waste. We also wanted to show that as chefs we are responsible for the food we serve. So we came up with a simple idea: our Refettorio offered to feed those in need, with meals made using leftover ingredients from the fair. We repurposed unwanted food into beautiful dishes cooked by the world’s best chefs, and filled the place with what we love. Architects, artists, designers – everyone joined in. I wanted to keep the concept alive, and Food for Soul was born in 2016. It was important to create something both meaningful and beautiful, because through beauty, you can rebuild people’s dignity. You enable a sense of self-worth, rather than of survival. At the end of the day, it is all about beauty, because the revolution will come from there.

Is beauty really enough to jump-start and maintain a sense of community?

You cannot start a revolution with beauty, but you will need it to make it work, because that’s what brings people together. We must start a peaceful revolution, as a group, before we run out of natural resources. The most sophisticated ways of thinking come from everyday people. Look at this Joseph

Beuys photograph. We are at the turn of the century, and Beuys is telling these farmers: ‘We are the revolution.’ The sculpture behind you, called *Sled*, is also by Beuys. The work refers to Tatar shamans who supposedly saved Beuys’s life after his plane crashed. They wrapped him in felt and fat. The dish ‘The crunchy part of the lasagna’ is a reference to the sculpture. As an Italian, the lasagna is part of our mythology, what children crave, what comforts us.

‘Oops! I dropped the lemon tart’ is probably your most famous dish. Could it be considered an artwork in its own right?

This is probably the only dish I could consider an artwork. I was in New York and stumbled upon a group show of artists attempting to perfectly rebuild the same imperfection, over and over again. The moment stayed in my head, and when my sous-chef Taka Kondo accidentally dropped a lemon tart, I connected the two. We worked very hard to recreate the mishap. We also designed a plate that looks as if it has been smashed on the floor. It’s almost art.

But it’s not art?

A chef is an artisan. Take this *Merda d’artista* can. Manzoni was free to do whatever he wanted. I could never go as far as he did because, at the end of the day, a chef has to cook good food. This is our job.

You have defined your cuisine as an attempt to ‘reinvent the archetype’ of Italian food. Do we need to break with tradition to move forward?

Think about Ai Weiwei breaking a 2,000-year-old vase. I look at these ashes every day, because it reminds me that tradition is always there, even if you try to erase it. My heritage, my grandmother, and the grandmother of my grandmother: they’re all there, no matter what I do. My father had an oil company, which distributed gas and kerosene. I bought Allora & Calzadilla’s *Petrified Petrol Pump* because it is heavy and impossible to move, just like my past. I always look to the future but I don’t have to forget where I come from. This is what I mean by reinventing the archetype.

Would you say that you collect memories through art, and that those memories help you to shape new ideas in the kitchen?

That’s a good way to put it. To me, artworks have a double meaning: the one intended by the artist, and the one we bring, according to our circumstances. I cook Italian food because this is my heritage. But, just like with art, where the food is from doesn’t really matter. We all serve emotions. ♦
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