



Interview

# *BREAKING* BREAD

The world's highest-rated chef *Massimo Bottura* has launched a scheme in London that not only tackles food waste, but also feeds people. He explains how, and why

Words **RACHEL WALKER**



“Passatelli noodles is probably the most delicious dish ever, I think,” says Massimo Bottura. It’s an odd thing to get misty-eyed over – breadcrumb-based dough that’s cooked in chicken broth.

After all, Bottura is known for far loftier dishes at his Modena based restaurant called Osteria Francescana. It’s certainly not peasant noodles that won him three Michelin stars or the top spot on the World’s 50 Best Restaurant list in 2016.

Today though, Bottura is excited about overripe bananas and Parmesan rind thanks to his latest project: *Bread Is Gold*. It’s a collaborative cookbook by ‘Massimo Bottura & Friends’, which showcases 160 recipes inspired by leftovers.

It is the product of an ongoing project run by Bottura’s charity, Food for Soul, which sets up ‘refettorios’, or community kitchens, around the world. The first, launched in Milan in 2015, then a British outpost, Refettorio Felix at St Cuthbert’s, opened in summer 2017, near Earl’s Court.

The idea behind the project is simple: tackle food waste, tackle hunger. Food donations arrive at the refettorios each morning, then volunteer chefs turn up to transform ingredients into lunches for vulnerable members of the local community. Only in true Bottura style, his ring-

round of chefs recruited a remarkable roster of Michelin-starred pals from René Redzepi to Ferran Adrià – so it’s less soupy leftovers, and more chickpea ragu with corn crisps.

When we meet, Bottura is fresh from a masterclass at Google HQ where he rustled up pasta with pesto made from stale bread: “much cheaper than using pine nuts”. He looks every bit the rock star chef, decked out in fur-lined Gucci Ace trainers, yet he’s part of an elite group who are forging out a more conscientious role for the ‘celebrity chef’ – it’s less about egos, and more about activism. Bottura is determined to use his influence to impact change.

He is credited with saving the livelihood of local Parmigiano-Reggiano producers back in 2012, when two earthquakes hit the Emilia-Romagna region, devastating the warehouses where the cheese is stored. Bottura’s



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response to the disaster was to develop a dish that used Parmesan as its main ingredient: ‘risotto cacio e pepe’. He set a date for chefs worldwide to put it on their menus, and all 366,000 damaged wheels of cheese were sold.

It’s the same matter-of-fact approach to problem solving that brought about Bottura’s first refettorio. The idea was born round the time of Expo 2015 in Milan. When a food theme was announced (‘Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life’) Bottura got barrage of requests to cook in the pavilions. “At first, I was flattered, and then I was unsettled,” he remembers. “I realised that no one was asking us chefs for our opinions or our ideas.”

Bottura began to think big. He started to dream about a pavilion where some of the world’s best chefs would cook with food waste, making dishes for people in need. Milan’s biggest Catholic organisation caught

wind of the plan and offered its support, a site was found, and on 28 May 2015 the doors opened at an abandoned 1930s theatre, with a six-month cheffing rota.

Not only is the original site still serving guests, but Bottura has rolled-out branches in Bologna, Rio de Janeiro, London and his hometown Modena, with a Paris launch set for March this year.

“London has been one of the easiest projects we did,” says Bottura, crediting the whole team – from their partnership with The Felix Project who source leftovers from round the capital, to designer Ilse Crawford who transformed the site. “It was a dark, creepy place,” Bottura remembers, “If you walk in now, you see how light streams in from high windows. We almost didn’t need any art because the structure is so beautiful.”

“People got the message straight away,” Bottura says, his eyes lighting up as he tells the story of a 92-year-old woman who asked for the microphone during the first lunch sitting. She stood up and addressed the whole room: “She said it was the most beautiful place she’d seen, she thanked us for creating a place for her, for the community, and she said she could die happy – that was just day one. It was unbelievable.”

Six months on, the list of guest chefs reads like a who’s who of the capital’s restaurant scene. Alain Ducasse from The Dorchester has put in a shift, as well as Angela Hartnett, Jason Atherton, Nuno Mendes, Margot Henderson, Giorgio Locatelli and Michel Roux Jr. “Chefs keep sending in staff from their kitchen to practise at the refettorio on their days off,” says Bottura. “It’s an incredible opportunity for young chefs to be learning from the best, and it’s in the spirit of being together.”

The trestle tables and crates of ugly vegetables must seem like a long way from high-tech kitchens and pristine ingredients most of them are used to though. I wonder if there’s something incongruous about these giants of fine dining fronting the anti food-waste movement, when theirs are some of the most lavish kitchens in the world?

Bottura explains that Michelin dining doesn’t need to be wasteful: “We serve 30 people for lunch, then 30 for dinner each day at Osteria Francescana, but we also have to do 120 staff meals – it forces us to



act in such an amazing, creative way not to waste anything,” he says. “We might just need a small part – the best part – for the diners. But the rest? We feed our staff,” Bottura says, explaining how the ethnic diversity among the chefs who flock to the Modena means that staff meals often have a Mexican or Japanese twist, depending on the team in charge.



This diversity runs through *Bread Is Gold*. In one chapter Japanese chef Yoshihiro Narisawa uses breadcrumbs, minced beef and mushrooms to make teriyaki hamburgers, while Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio uses leftover milk to make a Tres Leches sponge cake with dulce de leche ice cream. The meals might be extraordinary, but they all start with ordinary ingredients.

This style appeals to Bottura, whose complex dishes are often inspired by humble flavours steeped in memories. The book’s title *Bread Is Gold*, is a nod to one of the restaurant’s dishes, which pays homage to childhood breakfasts, dipping leftover bread into sweetened milk. Of course, the restaurant has an incarnation involving caramelised bread crunch, salted bread ice cream and gold tinted sugar – but homely influences are often the starting point for dishes.

“Everything happened round the table in our family,” Bottura says, listing off the four siblings, his parents, two grandmothers, aunt and uncle who he grew up with. “The table is where we discussed the future, we solved problems, we fought, we made up.” It’s this act of sitting down together for a meal that drives Bottura. It’s about companionship: “Breaking bread together is the first step toward rebuilding dignity and creating community.”

*Bread Is Gold*, by Massimo Bottura & Friends, £29.95, Phaidon, is out now

## Massimo's L O N D O N GLOSSARY

### FAVOURITE HOTEL

I usually stay in The Connaught. It’s a small place where I feel comfortable – it’s cosy, warm and lots of Italians stay there.  
*Carlos Place, Mayfair, W1*  
[the-connaught.co.uk](http://the-connaught.co.uk)

### PLACE TO PARTY

After The World’s 50 Best Restaurant awards, a group of us went back to The Clove Club and made gin and tonic carbonara. It was good: spaghetti finished with gin in the pan, a little lemon zest, egg yolk, bacon and Parmigiano.  
*380 Old Street, Shoreditch, EC1*  
[theloveclub.com](http://theloveclub.com)

### GO-TO RESTAURANTS

I look for places that give me a sense of home. So I visit my friend’s places. I might eat at Fergus’ [Fergus Henderson; St John, [stjohnrestaurant.com](http://stjohnrestaurant.com)] or at Ashley’s [Ashley Palmer Watts; Dinner by Heston, [dinnerbyheston.com](http://dinnerbyheston.com)] or at Brett’s [Brett Graham; The Ledbury, [theledbury.com](http://theledbury.com)] – they don’t treat me like a chef, but a friend – and I feel it.

### BEST PLACE TO BUY FOOD

I am usually on a tight schedule with no time to shop, but the food hall at Harvey Nichols is a fun place to explore.  
*109 - 125 Knightsbridge, SW1*

### FAVOURITE GALLERY

I’m passionate about contemporary art and a collector. I enjoy the White Cube in Bermondsey, and recently I did a pop-up with Sotheby’s against the backdrop of Lucio Fontana’s work.  
*144-152 Bermondsey Street, Bermondsey, SE1*  
[whitecube.com](http://whitecube.com)