



Tishman Environment
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Visiting Scholar Massimo Bottura Promotes Social Justice with Food



By **Fabio Parasecoli**, Associate
Professor and the Coordinator

of Food Studies

As food becomes more visible and central in contemporary culture, media, and politics, chefs are increasingly expected to participate in current debates on important issues ranging from health to justice and the environment. In particular, those who enjoy global visibility and celebrity appeal at times may assume a leading role in introducing changes in the way we produce, consume, and even think about food. While some culinary stars are not especially comfortable in such position, which comes with high expectations, others have embraced it fully. While they work in their restaurants, they also write, speak, and launch initiatives that are meant to make people think and, hopefully, modify their behaviors. That's the case with the Italian chef Massimo Bottura.

Massimo opened Osteria Francescana in 1995 in his hometown of Modena, Italy. Over the past decade, he has become the leader of the contemporary Italian kitchen. In June 2016, Osteria Francescana was awarded the No. 1 position on The World's 50 Best Restaurants list. Bottura is trying to introduce not only novelties in terms of materials, methods, and dishes, but also new concepts and guiding principles that are meant to foster

long-lasting paradigm shifts in various aspects of the food system, moving it toward social justice, food security, and environmental sustainability.

During the 2015 Milan Expo, which focused on food and nutrition, Bottura focused on using the produce and ingredients from the mega-event that would go to waste to create a new model of providing nourishment to the needy. The result was the Refettorio Ambrosiano, an abandoned theater next to a church in a working-class neighborhood in Milan. In this space, Bottura invited some of the most famous chefs from around the world to get creative and find ways to provide tasty food by taking advantage of what would be otherwise thrown away. Immigrants from other countries, refugees, as well as Italians, some of them homeless, are invited to enjoy a welcoming atmosphere where their needs are met with dignity and respect. In the Refettorio famous chefs (mostly unknown to the guests) prepare delicious dishes, while volunteers serve food to the guests like in a restaurant, avoiding some of the dynamics of soup kitchens and the social stigma that comes with it. By launching Refettorio, Bottura underlined the problem of food waste and the contributions chefs can provide by collaborating with food security experts, designers, and

architects, so that nutritious and flavorful meals are made available to the needy while creating a sense of community and participation.



The experience was so positive that Bottura launched a Refettorio in Rio de Janeiro during the 2016 Olympics, making use of the food that was bought for the athletes and never used, and later one in London. To manage and coordinate such initiatives, together with his wife Lara Gilmore, Massimo Bottura founded Food for Soul, a non-profit organization that aims to empower communities to fight food waste through social inclusion. Its goal is to encourage public, private and non-

profit organizations to create and sustain community kitchens around the world. Each project aims to bring a sense of dignity back to the table by promoting the values of art and beauty, encouraging solidarity within local communities and recovering food, places and people.

When we, as a Food Studies program, started collaborating with the Institute of Culinary Education to organize the conference [Zero Waste Food](#), which took place on April 28 and 29, 2017, we immediately decided to reach out to Massimo as a possible keynote speaker – an invitation which he accepted. At the same time, we organized the first US screening of the film *Theater of Life*, by Peter Svatek, which later became available on Netflix. In *Theater of Life*, food is not only a pleasure to covet, but also sustenance and consolation. As awesome as they may be, the featured chefs are not the only stars; the less glamorous aspects of food, its distribution, and its preparation take center stage together with the guests. Food's power to bring people together and provide some comfort, as temporary and not devoid of contradictions as it may be, is highlighted.

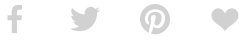
Thanks to a grant from the Tishman Environment and Design Center, we were able to hire a graduate student, Cecilia Depman, to collaborate on a

research project aiming at evaluating the opportunities to open a Refettorio in NYC. Led by Food for Soul leaders Massimo Bottura, Lara Gilmore, and Cristina Reni, the exploration focused on building a coalition of stakeholders interested in community empowerment through food. The participants researched the emergency food environment in the Bronx by visiting soup kitchens and understanding successful models for service.

Many organizations and passionate individuals are committed to improving the health and nutrition of Bronx residents through improved access to food. In New York, food insecurity is a problem increasingly being solved through repurposed food waste. Organizations such as City Harvest have established networks that redirect unused food to emergency food providers such as soup kitchens and food pantries around the city.

Food for Soul is interested in finding untapped potential in community spaces and otherwise wasted food to feed communities. A restaurant style soup kitchen model has a unique capacity not only to unite individuals around a communal table, but to establish an inclusive space for community and culture to flourish. The research that took place in the Bronx last semester helped to plant

the seeds for a project such as this;
one which would build upon the
existing landscape of healthy food
initiatives, and reimagine the role of
unused food and space in the health,
spirit, and well-being of a
community.



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