

# HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The new Italian inn outside Modena restored by chef Massimo Bottura and his wife and collaborator, Lara Gilmore, is an elegant extension of their personal passions.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANILO SCARPATI



ON AN ICY EVENING in late December, Italian chef Massimo Bottura is in his happy place, in a gleaming kitchen feeding family and friends. On the white marble counter, a shiny red Berkel slicer cradles a tower of mortadella. Shards of top-shelf Parmigiano Reggiano await dollops of extra-aged balsamic vinegar from his private reserve. Pizza bianca, bubbled crust bathed in olive oil, is rushed in from a customized wood-fired oven newly installed in the garden out back. “Ah, pizza time,” booms Bottura. “*Stupendo!*”

He tops the hot pie with ribbons of mortadella, feeds a slice to his 22-year-old daughter, Alexa, who is home for the holidays, having just finished school at American University in Washington, D.C. A hungry crowd swarms around Bottura. Antonella Ferrari, the 48-year-old granddaughter of Enzo (Modena’s legendary sports car king), inches in as another pizza arrives.

It’s a few days before Christmas at a country estate outside Modena, in Emilia-Romagna, the breadbasket of Italy. Bottura, 56, and his American wife and business partner, Lara Gilmore, 51, rescued the property from foreclosure almost two years ago. The place, said to have hosted many Gatsby-style soirées at the turn of the last century, when a bachelor bon vivant named Luigi Magelli was lord of the manor, has come alive once again.

The Ferrari family, who has known Bottura for decades, is inaugurating the new kitchen and celebrating the birthday of Antonella’s husband, Alberto Galassi, CEO of Italian yacht producer the Ferretti Group. Champagne is free-flowing; classic jazz fills the house; Galassi and friends pose for iPhone snaps in front of an enormous triptych—a Lego version of Ai Weiwei’s iconic work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*—that anchors the main hall. Bottura is a voracious collector of contemporary art and vintage vinyl, frequent inspirations for his avant-garde cooking.

After the *aperitivo*, the party moves into an adjacent carriage house filled with prints from Damien Hirst’s *The Last Supper* series, a collection of 13 prints featuring pharmaceutical labels of iconic British foods. Bottura serves a seven-course tasting menu with some of his elaborately named hit dishes, including Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano and Beautiful, Psychedelic Spin-Painted Veal, Not Flame Grilled, from Osteria Francescana, his art-filled three-Michelin-star flagship restaurant 20 minutes away in the center of Modena.

Since last summer, when the first renovations were done, Bottura and Gilmore have been hosting exclusive

**RUSTIC RETREAT** The 12-acre inn (left) includes a music-listening room, an eat-in kitchen, a tennis court and a pool; Massimo Bottura and Lara Gilmore (right, in their own Gucci clothes), in the cocktail room with Barbara Kruger’s *Go/Stay*.



“THE IDEA IS TO KEEP PEOPLE ENTERTAINED... JUST ENJOYING THIS COZY OLD HOUSE WITH A LOT OF ECLECTIC ART IN IT.”

—LARA GILMORE



CENTER, FAR RIGHT: TEENAGE SMOKERS, ED TEMPLETON, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ROBERT'S PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

evenings here, mostly dinners for groups in the carriage house space. The setting reflects their personal interests, infused with contemporary art, jazz, Italian design and antiques. But it isn't, in fact, their private home. (They live a short drive away in Modena.)

Maria Luigia, as they rechristened the 12-acre property in honor of Bottura's late mother, marks the couple's debut as innkeepers. The 12-room stone house, which spans three floors and a penthouse tower, welcomes its first guests this spring. The amenities include a tennis court, swimming pool, music-listening room and eat-in kitchen where guests are served breakfast and a light lunch.

“We have a beautiful old Victrola and this great collection of records, an art library, a lounge area,” says Gilmore. “The idea is to keep people entertained even in the damp winter months, just enjoying this cozy old house with a lot of eclectic art in it.”

Booking a room there (rates will start around 450 euros, or \$519, a night) will also allow pre-booking for reservations at Osteria Francescana, the best restaurant on earth according to the World's 50 Best Restaurants, the hugely influential ranking released every June. Staying there will also provide extended access to Bottura and Gilmore's inner world in Emilia-Romagna, with occasional cooking classes and visits to their favorite purveyors and personal haunts.

The couple, who met in New York in the early 1990s, have been married 23 years, collaborating professionally the whole time. Gilmore, who once worked in art and theater, is her husband's unofficial ghostwriter, the president of the Food for Soul soup kitchen project they launched together three years ago and his adviser on everything. They have two kids (their son, Charlie, is 18) and a new pair of golden retriever puppies.

Welcome amenities at their new country inn will reflect the region they love. The rooms will be supplied with half bottles of Lambrusco, the area's beloved sparkling red wine, and nuggets of Parmigiano Reggiano, its most famous cheese. On a warm summer day, Bottura's chefs might be blowing off steam with a seven-on-seven game of soccer out back (the turf tennis court doubles as a soccer pitch), while Gilmore snips peas and tomatoes from her produce patch.

If he's not on the road, as he often is, Bottura may be sunk into his “throne,” as Gilmore describes the polka-dotted Alessandro Mendini Proust chair in the music-listening room, surrounded by thousands of vintage LPs. Or he may be in the kitchen working on an Emilian breakfast of *gnocco fritto*, pancetta, fresh ricotta and cherry jam. Big appetites might start the day with *cotechino* sausage topped with warm zabaiglione, just like Bottura's mom used to make.

Bottura is a chef who loves to travel. Since his restaurant bumped Spain's El Celler de Can Roca from the top spot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list for the first time three years ago (it regained that slot in 2018, after losing it to Eleven Madison Park in 2017), the opportunities to do so have been flooding in.

In the weeks before Christmas, he lectured at Harvard, cooked a charity dinner in New York with chef friends Joan Roca and Mauro Colagreco, collaborated on a banquet in Milan with his mentor Alain Ducasse and introduced Patti Smith onstage at a gala concert on the Adriatic honoring the 150th anniversary of Rossini's death. He was in Naples after the

concert, launching a soup kitchen with artist Mimmo Paladino, the latest outpost of Food for Soul's *refettorio* concept, serving surplus food to the poor in an artist-designed space.

Bottura's recent manic travel took place while he was juggling plans for other projects: a wild new 1960s-themed restaurant in Dubai called Torno Subito that recently opened at the W Hotel; a follow-up to the Gucci Osteria (Bottura's restaurant, a licensing deal with the luxury clothing brand) that opened in Florence last year, coming next winter to the flagship Gucci boutique in Beverly Hills; and two more high-concept soup kitchens opening soon in San Francisco and the Mexican Yucatán. “In 2018, we were much more than the sum of our recipes,” says Bottura. “We could go to New York and raise more than \$1 million for [the homebound food-delivery charity] God's Love We Deliver; we could open refettorios and fight food waste; we could create culture.”

Despite all the far-flung projects and appearances, Bottura remains intensely devoted to his hometown, Modena, best known as the birthplace of Ferrari, Maserati and Pavarotti. He maintains a close circle of confidantes he grew up with there.

“In high school he was not very different from the person he is today—a lot of energy, not easy to put in a framework, very funny,” says his childhood friend Marco Bizzarri, now the CEO of Gucci, with whom Bottura shared a school desk for five years. (Gucci and Bottura are currently collaborating on several

**THE ART OF LIVING**

Right: One of Maria Luigia's 12 guest rooms, with Gucci wallpaper. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A room featuring works from the couple's art collection, including Robert Longo's *Black Flag*; Autumn in New York, one of Bottura's iconic dishes; a guest room with Ed Templeton's *Teenage Smokers*; a bathroom; Bottura's Caesar Salad in Bloom; a bedroom with a Gio Ponti mirror and vintage armchair; Beautiful, Psychedelic Spin-Painted Veal, Not Flame Grilled; an entrance with Luigi Ontani's *Carabiniere*.



culinary projects, and Bottura is, separately, an official ambassador of the brand.)

Though Bottura loves promoting his city, for visitors Modena unfortunately offers few decent places to stay, with only a couple of modest bed and breakfasts in the old town and no luxury hotels. To remedy that, a few years back Bottura and Gilmore made a failed bid to buy the city's lone grande dame hotel, the aging Canalgrande, where they had their wedding reception two decades earlier.

The couple, meanwhile, began scouring the hills above the city for a simple retreat of their own, an escape from their restaurant just big enough to host close friends and VIP diners now and then. That's when they heard about a vast neglected property, just past city limits, coming up for court-ordered auction for the fifth or sixth time. Though it was much larger than what they'd been after, they decided to bid, offering 700,000 euros (about \$800,000).

They were in New York for an event when they learned that their lowball offer had been accepted. “I received this message at six in the morning: ‘The country house is yours; the court accepted your offer,’” recalls Bottura. “I said, ‘Oh, f—k, and now what are we going to do?’”

The once-palatial property, an industrialist son's squandered inheritance, was in a sad state of neglect. Though the structures were solid and the turn-of-the-century frescoes on the ceilings mostly intact, the place was a mess.



**MAN OF THE HOUSE**  
 Left: Bottura, preparing an Emilian breakfast in Maria Luigia's eat-in kitchen, which features artist Carlo Benvenuto's *Maraschino Cherries*. Opposite: The main hall, which welcomes guests with Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and designer Piero Lissoni's Extrasoft sofa, under a ceiling of Baroque-style murals.

"In the swimming pool there were eels, frogs, snakes," says Bottura. "We didn't know there was a tennis court, because you couldn't see it. It was so overgrown with moss and lichen everywhere." The formerly majestic long gravel driveway was lined with trees and bushes so unruly they scraped the sides of cars as they approached the tall iron gates.

While Bottura maintained his punishing travel schedule, Gilmore, who grew up in a big house with a garden just outside New York City, focused nearly full time on nursing the property back to health. The grounds, covered in a dozen sturdy ancient oaks, became her first project. "I fell in love with the garden, the trees," she says.

While they waited for construction permits for the 200-year-old stone house, they began to clear, plant and landscape. The first summer, in 2017, they filled produce beds with autumn seeds that soon sprang to life. They planted rosebushes near the pool and irises around the man-made lake, along with young fruit trees and 6,000 tulip bulbs around the property. A new crop of farro went into the big field out front. By the time winter arrived, the grounds were starting to bloom. "Nature responds so well to being taken care of," says Gilmore.

Before work on the interiors kicked off, one obstacle remained. Though the main house hadn't been occupied in years, members of its destitute owner's family were living in a squalid upstairs apartment in the carriage house, above the space where big dinners are

now held. Bottura and Gilmore offered to help finance a new home for them in town. It would be six months before the family members finally moved out.

As renovations kicked off in 2018, the couple turned to friends with expertise in the hotel and design fields for help and advice. "We couldn't do this without all these connections we've built up over the years," says Gilmore. By last December, the renovations, entirely self-funded, had cost them another \$1 million or so.

They approached the main house as an eclectic extension of their own home. Just past the front door, under a ceiling covered in Baroque-style murals, they installed designer Piero Lissoni's Extrasoft sofa, an inviting modular piece in supple brown leather. "Hopefully this will create this idea to plop down, have a drink, have your coffee," says Gilmore. In a glassed-in atrium, another plush sofa for lounging is tucked among leafy indoor plants in front of an oversize collage piece from Brazilian artist Vik Muniz. Guest rooms are filled with art folios from their vast personal library, antique steamer trunks, deco mirrors and bright patterned wallpaper from Gucci.

One recent afternoon, as work on the elevator, lighting, windows and trimmings continues, the main house is buzzing with Bottura's old friends. His best childhood pal, Massimo Morandi, whose company contributed retro fixtures to the pastel-tiled bathrooms, swings by to see how much has changed since the last time he was there. Bottura's ex-girlfriend, interior designer Catia Baccolini, whom he dated for

14 years starting in high school, is already on-site. Baccolini, who has been consulting on the design at Maria Luigia, has played a key role in his projects going back to the beginning of Osteria Francescana in 1995. "You would think that's really awkward," says Gilmore, "but at the end of the day, that's kind of the beauty of a small town: You can't run away from your past."

Andrea Bigi (Bottura's "music pusher," as he calls him) pulls in with a new toy, a vintage reel-to-reel player. Francesco Mazzoli, son of Bottura's longtime art dealer, Emilio Mazzoli, arrives with another new piece for the house: Pinocchio painted on wood by Italian artist Marcello Jori. Bottura finds a place for it, immediately, on a kitchen wall.

Though there's plenty left to do before opening in the spring, when Bottura and Gilmore expect their first overnight guests to arrive, Maria Luigia is already filled with treasures, including pieces shifted from the couple's home and restaurant and a few acquired with the project in mind. Collecting contemporary art has become a compulsion in the 20-plus years since they bought their first work together, a hell-themed tableau by Marco Cingolani that was relocated to a top-floor suite at Maria Luigia. "I bought that when my brother Andrea died," says Bottura, during a tour of the house.

The artworks at Maria Luigia all have stories to tell. Tracey Emin's profane neon piece glowing *Red, White, and Fucking Blue* hangs on the ground floor above a 1950s Italian couch. "I bought this for Lara, maybe 12 years ago," says Bottura.

Pieces by other acclaimed artists are scattered throughout the house. There are works by Matthew Barney, Doug Aitken, Robert Longo and Andy Warhol. Hanging in one bedroom are color photos by Wolfgang Tillmans, shot in Berlin in the early 1990s, including a famous image of the musician Moby, whom Bottura met around that time, when he was cooking at Caffè di Nonna in New York (Gilmore was the bartender there when they started dating). "Moby was always arriving at the restaurant around three," he recalls, "asking for a vegan sandwich when the kitchen was almost closed for lunch."

Many of the new acquisitions are on the grounds, which double as a sculpture park with large works, mostly by Italian artists, seamlessly integrated into the landscape. *Babbo*, a pagan figure clutching a club in one hand, by Sandro Chia, welcomes new arrivals just outside the front door. A giant's stone head, by Enzo Cucchi, reclines in the man-made lake. A terracotta figure of Neptune stands watch nearby, one of several pieces purchased at auction last fall from Pierre Bergé's estate.

There's a spirit of playful provocation to the choices Bottura and Gilmore have made throughout Maria Luigia, the juxtapositions of the decorous and daring, high-minded and homey. In a sly piece from artist Giorgio di Palma, hidden in plain sight on a first-floor balcony just above the front door, an oversize pair of ceramic gelato cups drips pistachio and strawberry paint down the face of the building, as if melting in the midday sun. The piece mirrors Bottura's avant-garde cuisine.

"It's the ironic way of looking at food," he says. "Art, it's like cooking—to evolve, you always look to the past to create something new." ●

