

STORIES GATHERED *by* ANDREA PETRINI
WORKS *by* CARLO BENVENUTO
PORTRAITS *by* SOFIE DELAUW

B&B

He is one of the most celebrated chefs in the world. The other is an accomplice from way back. The first has untidy hair and a laid back way of speaking, feet clad in New Balance sneakers that he collects like Bernard-Herni Lévy collects Yamamoto white shirts. The second is reserved by nature, frugal with words. So are his artworks that are at the apex of their power when viewed from a distance. It's objectification that this liquid silver cook has always sought as a kind of refuge - in his work, in his life - from the anguish of instantaneous over-excitement.

They have known each other and have admired each other for more than twenty years, like a reciprocal reflection. One is Modenese born and bred, the other an adopted Milanese. From the same generation, they are made for each other. Their names are Massimo Bottura and Carlo Benvenuto. We know them as B&B, and they go together like bed and breakfast. When we proposed an interview for *Cook_inc*, he was the prodigal student of Ducasse and Adrià. ("Good lord it's about time! What number are you up to with the magazine? The sixth? The seventh? Why haven't you come yet to the Francescana?). He said yes, but had his conditions: "Carlo Benvenuto has got to be in it too". Great idea! I've had him in my sights for a while, ever since I discovered his crystal glass sculptures displayed in Bottura's restaurant, who is himself an expert on contemporary art and a keen collector. He is also married to the fantastic Lara, maman to Alexa and Charlie and also an art critic.

I flicked through the sparse pages of Benvenuto's artistic biography well before finding out that he was to be a collaborator on the next literary endeavour of Massimo Bottura that was released in September by Phaidon. It's impossible to neatly label his years of activity. Sculptor? Photographer? Painter? He is certainly a thinker, and you can see it when he is at the stove. He adopts concepts for better cooking and food that sublimate



mere thoughts. We met one Tuesday morning as torrential rain battered Milan, one shooting out of the motorway exit ("I'm coming but I'm late, it was bumper to bumper from Modena Nord. You get the pastries!") and one already in slippers feet in his apartment behind the station. It's a house where art objects combine to simulate an impromptu exhibition.

It's a freeflowing conversation, or nearly, over a cup of coffee ("But I'll tell you, I do not make good coffee," warns the host) or tea, with compulsive totes on an electronic cigarette punctuating a face to face dialogue that flows without interruption. Two hours later the battery is almost dead as I hit stop on the iPad's AudioMemos. These extracts are a kind of summary.

MASSIMO BOTTURA: *We come from different worlds but with complementary approaches. Here we are in Milan with biscuits and coffee. There's a part of ritual in all our way of living Italian-ness. We break bread and share it with everyone...*

CARLO BENVENUTO: *The idea of sitting around a table forms part of our tradition. I don't think an Italian can take lessons from anybody, except maybe the French in this. In many other parts of the world people have to still learn 'genetically' how to share a table.*

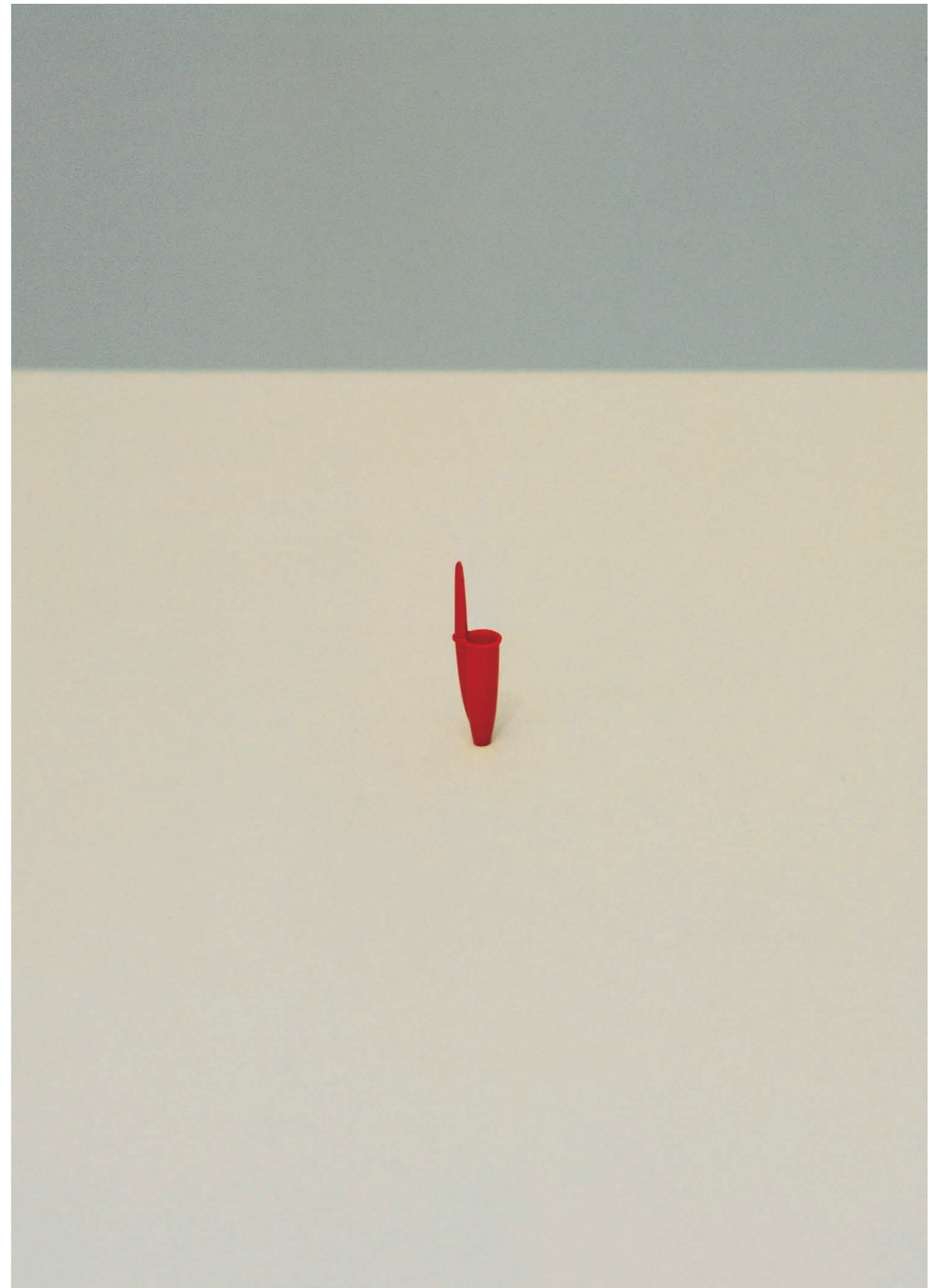
MB: *I read about a chef from Bologna who went to work in Copenhagen and it made me really mad. He said it was easier to find good organic food in Denmark than in Italy. What the hell do I care about organic food? I want to eat good things, delicious carrots or amazing tomatoes. Markets, eating locally and zero kilometre philosophy is in my head and in my brain.*

CB: *What is organic? It still needs to be defined. For me the most important thing is the palate.*

MB: *Yes, that's what must guide us. You take technique and you adapt it. When I need to choose fish that I get from Sardinia, I send my two Japanese chefs, Yohji and Taka. They touch it with a finger, they know these things, they have it in their blood. They tell me straight away: this fish was caught with a net, that other one is line caught. This one was slaughtered correctly and so we can cook it this way. All the guys from the Francescana have learnt to work like this. As the head of the restaurant, I have given each one the job for which they were born. Davide is different from Yohji and Taka, he has an approach and a sensibility that no-one else has. A unique palate. When we look at him in the face we get it straight away, without words. Cultural differences count a lot. When we speak of creativity, of dreams and folly, you can see that Taka and Yohji are in difficulty because they were not born with this kind of culture. We Italians navigate in the most total folly, we are crazy individualists. And it's not easy to make a team when you compensate for that.*

CAN YOU GIVE US AN EXAMPLE?

MB: *Yes. Yesterday we were in a meeting at Francescana with the whole staff. Beppe Palmieri, our maître d', sommelier and a lot more, said: "I want to do a bit of outing. Tell me how I can be better so that I can make the whole Francescana better". So I told him that he often repeats the expression 'us floor staff, us floor staff'. But why talk just of the floor? It is fundamentally important of course, but you should rather employ the catch phrase 'we of the Francescana'. You need to end the separation between floor and kitchen. In the moment when there is synergy, the floor interacts with the kitchen. For us, the staff meal is unique, we eat together on tables and benches, every day someone different takes their turn cooking for the others. We need to be one, like when the floor covers the kitchen for a dispute or an error, the plate might have been sitting on the pass for 45 seconds and the sauce might form a film for example. When you have a restaurant, it's the team spirit that counts and feeling like a family. Do you know that when Taka goes on holiday he goes with others from the Francescana?*



Untitled, 41 x 32, c-print, 2010



Untitled, 75 x 75, c-print, 2013

CB: Shall we get back to the palate?

MB: A chef should realise and be humble about his capacity, before going out on a limb. I have been in certain restaurants where I have chewed but I had nothing in my mouth, only technique. Contemporary food is made not only from the quality of the ingredients but also the ideas that are expressed in the dish. If I can't express them and I express only technique, where do I go? I will only do dishes that are not up to scratch, not interesting, just...

CB: Pleasant?

MB: The dialogue is first with the palate, then with the head. Or I should say with our mental palate. I often see dishes that are created in order to provoke, with an excess of flavours that are unbalanced in your mouth. You can never lose sight of taste. A caper might be salted by the sea breeze of Pantelleria or be without an excess of vinegar because it's been drained well. Or unsalted like it should be. Sometimes I ask myself when I meet certain chefs, haven't they ever tasted real flavours?

CARLO, MASSIMO, HOW DID YOU GUYS MEET?

CB: When I had my first exhibition in the Emilio Mazzoli gallery in Modena in 1998 or '99, I don't remember...

MB: In contemporary art the quality of the idea is what counts. People find it hard to understand that. When people talk about art and food, too often I see cooks who are only working with the visual or more superficial aspect of contemporary art.

CB: Like when you take this painting by Mario Schifano and make a dish that looks like it.

IS MIMICRY AN INFANTILE DISEASE THAT HAS BEEN ACCUSED IN THE PAST OF EXTREMISM?

CB: 99% of chefs who say they are inspired by art make objects that might be simple or sophisticated but that recall the object itself too much. It's a pure imitation of surface. Aesthetics are only the result of a process that is a lot more complicated, a process that every chef should undergo. Until the era of the avant-garde, let's say the early 1900s to simplify things, it was clear that sculptors and baroque painters produced a certain kind of thing or image. There was sculpture and there was painting. Aesthetically they were alike in the exaggeration of movement, light and shadow taken to extremes. How can a chef produce a dish that is authentically baroque, I ask myself? A dish that is not necessarily just light and shadow but with exaggerated variations of flavour, of heat and cold, of consistency with a richness that is purposely extreme. That would be the best way to interpret a baroque work from the 1600s. Not limiting oneself to something like a dish on a red and black background with white stuff and palm leaves coming out. That is not baroque food. It seems obvious. But it isn't.

MB: You know why? Because there is no culture of listening. Like when Italian critics break our balls saying that Carlo Cracco and many of us should stay in the kitchen and not travel the world promoting not only our restaurant but Italian food in general. I remember a dish by Pietro Leemann, so beautiful, the maximum of minimalism, about 10 or 15 years ago. A careless critic, I don't remember who, spoke of a gastronomic minimalism. What a load of bullshit. It was a cube that held a thousand ideas. Minimalism is the memory of my mother who tossed the tagliatelle and put them in a dish. That is minimalism. Arte Povera. Like my potato that wanted to be a truffle, an almost ugly dish but interesting. When I develop an idea I

ask myself questions and I seek an answer to them every day I enter the kitchen. Why boil meat to make a bollito? Are we sure that tradition has a huge respect for raw ingredients? In my Bollito non Bollito every piece of meat is cooked separately at low temperature. It's a temporal cubism like you rightly said Carlo. Or like the photograph that I had displayed inside the Franciscana made of eight superimposed frames that at the end are a suspended still life, almost a metaphysical thing...

CB: Talking about minimalism, the cube is the purest form there is. But in cooking, the form is not decisive. The important thing is not how you present a dish, but that it invokes a reflection: how has the ingredient been treated? What is the minimalism of the cooking? What is the minimum waste that I can achieve with a product, handling it as little as possible but without presenting, say, a raw carrot? It seems very simple but you need a mental tightrope as well as the rest.

WE CONTINUE TO BE INSPIRED BY POST IMPRESSIONIST PAINTINGS LIKE "LE DEJENER SUL L'HERBE" OR RE-DOING ARCIMBOLDO..

MB: Sorry but what about the foie gras terrine with truffle and Fontana cut by Gualtiero Marchesi? Or Jackson Pollock's Dripping? It certainly wasn't a sense of beauty he was chasing.

CB: It was the sensation of energy. In Pollock's Dripping there was the refusal to touch the canvas with the brush. That was the most important thing, to not touch the canvas during the process. I wouldn't honestly know how to translate this not touching the product into food, but it may be how you energise through gesture. Definitely not an effect of sauce.



PIERRE GAGNAIRE USES DRIPPED SAUCES LIKE AN AUTHOR'S SIGNATURE...

MB: It's a cultural problem. Knowledge has become too approximate and superficial. In a society held together by Google, we will soon know everything but nothing. We won't know anything anymore because we won't allow ourselves the time to take a book in our hands. We don't go deeply into anything anymore, we want to get straight to the point. In the kitchen we work to music. When the guys put on a track of Marvin Gaye and they say to me, "what a great song" they are surprised when I tell them the piece was written in 1969..

CB: The will to deepen an experience is missing. That's why I only work with objects that are part of my daily life: a glass, a bic pen, a guitar. I'm not trying to close myself off or even to protect me from myself, but to seek a little concentration. It's impossible to relate to all the stimuli in the world today. The danger is that they bring you down to their level.

MB: Reflection has to transform itself in passion. Interest is a superficial thing. When you just look at a thing, you pay it attention but you don't get inside it. Passion is something else. It devours you. It makes you suffer. You have to take pills for your stomach because real passion erodes your insides.

CB: Any thing/argument/substance is interesting if it also communicates a kind of passion.

MB: Let's get back to the kitchen. We installed a wireless system so that everyone is connected with everyone else, with the world, not only to music and food. We downloaded all Marvin Gaye's tracks from iTunes. If you plumb the bottom of your interests, like I did and like I hope my daughter and all

the other youngsters at the Francescana do, the brain becomes an expression of what we are. Of what we are doing. Just before Christmas I asked everyone: "I'll ask you a question because in January it will be the subject of my lesson at Identità Golose: 'Who are you?' " It's a question drawn from the story by Pirandello in his One, no-one, a hundred thousand. In Russian constructivism, do you know the trans-avant-garde? In the kitchen, everyone has a little book where they take notes. I reformulated the question: but who are you? After two days, the answers came in. One girl said to me "I'm from Parma and I was inspired by the Half Sailboat Painting by Jonathan Borowsky, a painting that shows only half of a boat. She made Half Cheese, a marvellous creation from Emilia with pumpkin and parmesan as a dessert. Laura, another, is a graphic design graduate. I put her alongside Taka and she learnt from him immediately. Her mind was a muscle just waiting to be developed. I also want her on the stage at Milan. Sara too. Once upon a time we didn't have girls in the Francescana, but the pastry chef had been making bread for some time before she replied to the question 'who are you?' by making bread that was totally white, White on White, like White Light White Heat by the Velvet Underground. Note well, she is Japanese. It was a play on our land, on the tomato, the mozzarella, the basil, a completely white land. Our land, like a zen garden with slightly wavy forms. If you don't know yourself and your limits, if you don't examine the bottom of your heart, or your knowledge of your culture, you will never be able to express interesting things.



Untitled, 235 x 175, c-print, 2008

WE KNOW HOW YOU MET BUT NOT HOW YOU RE-MET...

MB: I found the same things in Carlo that I wanted to create in the kitchen. Look at this sculpture of his. What is it? A 25 cent glass! But placed on the studio table where he works, with a ray of light streaming through the window of his apartment on Lake Maggiore, this glass becomes magic, a vehicle of magic light you can see if you have a little poetry in your soul. The glass is not a simple glass, but a vehicle of emotions. Carlo doesn't lose himself in the daily things. He takes the glass to Venice, gets them to make a mould and remake it as Murano glass, and the glass becomes an artwork. It's different from my potato that doesn't have to be a truffle nor an artwork. Would you rather eat more potatoes or truffles in your life? The farmers working for my father used to find one kilo truffles and boil them, calling them crazy potatoes. When there were no more potatoes, they would eat the boiled truffles and say: "Bugger! Today we have to eat the crazy potatoes!" Carlo and I have similar creative processes. Carlo, a conceptual artist, is all about the idea. I'm about the palate.

CB: Massimo and I talked about food without him understanding much. We talked about bones. "How do you make a local dish?" he asked me. And I would ask him in turn, "what does local mean to you?" A chef like him should not be tied to the notion of being an artisan, which is not a defect in itself but can be a limit.



Riso cacio e pepe, photography from Massimo Bottura's book, Never trust a skinny Italian Chef.

MB: If I want a puff pastry it absolutely has to be like Perbellini's one. Perfection is the go-between of dreams. Reaching your dream is realising that the puff pastry has to be the best in the world, as does the yoghurt to make ice cream. And so on. Rediscovering the dream: it's the pheasant's bones that produce exactly the right memory for me, the devastating recollection of the pheasant my grandmother would bake, with an aroma that would flood the house. You need to trust your own palate to open the doors of your imagination. When I touch the ingredient, I observe it, I caress it, and as I say to Pierangelini, I fall in love... A 50 year old balsamic vinegar for example that doesn't have to touch heat, it just has to be placed in a perfect veal or beef broth, clear and glossy, a marvellous complexity that is drawn from 50 years of history.

CB: I respect the object, I don't touch it. Massimo respects the flavour he has in mind, he doesn't distort it but amplifies it. When he talks about the pheasant cooked with the Rotovapor to make a concentrate of bones and toasted skin, for him it is an ultimate olfactory sensation because his point of reference is his grandmother's pheasant. It's pheasant that he cooks perfectly himself as well. He uses and doesn't 'touch' raw ingredients like I don't 'touch' objects, respecting their real dimensions, one at a time. The lid of a biro is the same size as the biro I use as a model, the cup is the same dimension as the real one. I cherish the idea of an object that I don't want to touch. He has the same idea about flavour and it is this idea that made him fall in love with cooking. Massimo's palate is a physiological gift, an extreme sensibility for shadows and form. Mine is rougher. For me, acidic is acidic, and that's it. For him there are infinite gradients.

MB: But it's a gift that can also harm you, it renders you almost autistic.

I worked very hard on the tribute to Thelonious Monk. But the dish changed completely, in its *raison d'être* - "Black on Black" - only when we were able to freeze dry the sea urchins. We mixed them with a powder of vegetables and burned algae that was supposed to be as good as the one made by a small producer in South Italy, really exceptional. When we took this road, the dish finally turned a corner and entered into hyperspace.

The cotechino (boiled pork sausage) association asked me to study their product and I developed the dish Cotechino and Lentils for 365 days a year. It's a raviolo like a Chinese dumpling, where the fatty part has been removed and there is just the gelatinous part mixed with the cotechino. It's a raviolo that gives you all the pleasure of this ancient dish with a cleanliness on the palate. You need to be open to other things, taking the best of what there is and question yourself, always.

CB: I studied painting but I paint rarely, mainly because of the extreme respect I have for painting and for the difficulty of expressing yourself and being understood in that medium, but not because I lack technique. I am an artist because I drew well as a child. I have visited so many museums, seeking to copy technique. I liked the smaller, less important works by great artists because it was easy to see their tricks and meth-

od. The turning point came when, after my studies, I had to have my first show, and I asked myself what touchstone I could use to construct my paintings. I thought of photography, and having a clean slate and the minimum gesture that I could use to make it into a work of art. I didn't know how to shoot pictures and I borrowed a camera from a friend. In 1990, the last year at the academy, I told myself that my incapacity to photograph would both be about me and would add something to the work. It would add the fact that I want to use the minimum possible technical intervention, and not even in this case technique, because I have none. I have always wanted to talk about the minimum choices, which is what the eyes do when they see something interesting. It was liberating to free myself from all that I could learn from a technical point of view.

MB: Carlo says he drew well as a child. That means he was exposed to it. Probably at school. The school has the most important job in society, that of recognising talent. If I see you for what you are, I add value to you, I push you, I put your on your path. Not like my father who forced me into law, until I said to him: "Fuck you, I will do what I enjoy". Or like Yohji, whose father in Japan wanted him to take up the reins of the family pharmacy until he said: "I'm not coming back, I'm going to be a chef". We are lucky in life if we have the fortune to meet people and institutions who can recognise talent. My daughter is in her last year of high school in Colorado. She tells a story of the first day of school when they put all the desks in a circle and everyone could express an opinion about books they had read like *Into the Wild* or the film *The Corporation* by Michael Moore that talks about the role of corporations in the great national industries. They were teaching them how to think. Who are you? What do you want to do? Do you like photography? Do you have the sensibility to grasp movement?

AND HOW DID YOU GET YOUR BOOK TOGETHER?

MB: For years I was too concerned with being contemporary. Every time they would ask me to do a book I felt like the recipes, even the more recent ones, were already too old to make a book. It was a phone call at two in the morning with René Redzepi that drove me to accept the challenge. All the recipes included, from 1993 to today, have been modified, they have evolved. My food is an open book. No secrets. I took '93 as a point of reference. It was the year five seasons of Parmesan aging was introduced - previously it had been only three - when Ducasse came to eat at my place for the first time. The onion cappuccino was an earlier creation. I express the life of the Franciscana and the people who have built it up to the present day. Beppe Palmieri says my wife Lara is the most important person in the restaurant. She is the bumper and everyone confides in her if they want to talk to me. She conceptualises everything we do...

CB: One tries to understand art and the other...

MB: The book is about moments of total reflection when everything is wiped clean and the creative earthquake that is part of yourself. The one that destroys everything and that makes you suffer.



taste, that El Dorado of flavour out of reach. He finds it 90% of the time but not 100%. If he had found it, he would stop looking. There is no fetishism about the dish in his work, and neither in mine.

We didn't want to do a recipe book. If I have been interested in the food, it hasn't been to make finished dishes. I don't like 99% of food photos. I find them ugly, uninviting, cold, and with tricks like making the food shinier, the product more humid, that you can see straight away. I hate that clinical approach.

Generally my artistic work is quite violent. I have always thought Roberto Rossellini's work was crude aesthetically, even reflective. But it's a crudeness that doesn't lack reflection. As you have pointed out, I also work like he does, by stripping away. I love Bertolt Brecht. For his respect of the past, for his distance and for the violence of his approach. There's love in him but also insult. My violence comes out when it's displayed in collective exhibitions.

At the New Delhi triennial Cattelan was with me. Things work well between us. There was a glass and a cow that had Vespa

handles in the place of its horns. Art and the reaction to art. My work is never a reflection on nostalgia but on the impossibility of going forward. I go forward declaring it's impossible to do so. Cattelan expresses impossibility on the other hand by destroying everything. I don't destroy. I seek to slow down, to strip, to take weight from things. The most simple image is a memory of what could be art. My work is violent but based on easy images that seduce for all the wrong reasons. And that's OK with me. People put my works in their homes because there is the grandmother's glass and that is comforting. That's how they fall into the trap.

MB: The comforting detail of the grandmother's cup is like when you chew the hare stew in my dish Camouflage. It's so intense and animal that I serve it with my grandmother's sbriciolona (crumbly shortcrust dessert). After the eruption, you need it to rebalance your palate and calm your brain. But it is a dish that is too intense and even the sbriciolona is a trick. It can't slow the game, not even with all that goodness and will. She is also a camouflage. Talking about palates, it's time for lunch. What do you say we pay a surprise visit to my friend Andrea Berton?

In the Mazzoli gallery in Modena we found a 'cataloguer'. We asked him if he could catalogue some extraordinary work through photography. The work is the daily life of the Franciscana, with iconic concentration of the gestures and dreams that guide us. Carlo worked differently.

CB: Stefano Graziani was our 'cataloguer'. He produced a series of images that were very chaotic, one after another, of working with raw materials and the labour of inspiration. I brought a moment of calm and took a step backwards. I didn't treat the dishes from a culinary point of view. They are, as usual, not touched, shot from a neutral point of view and from not too high. Visually it's as if the dish had been served in front of me. It's distant, very white. It's treated like an object. It's not a mere problem of food or ingredients but of rivalry and a thought that is objectified. In general I don't like photos of food. I was inspired by the old gastronomy books of Larousse, frontal photographs, lean dishes placed together on the same table, like a big buffet. I would also have liked to have a big page, maybe numbered. But it was too much and we couldn't do it. I wanted however to work more on the experience of the thought than on the food. Massimo's food interested me also for the nostalgia in the primary flavours, of that elusive



3 sculptures in Murano glass, 1999
(photography by Antonio Maniscalco)