

INNOVATION

What the World's Best Restaurant Knows About Keeping Its Creative Edge

by Francesca Gino

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NICOLO CAMPO/GETTY IMAGES

Many companies have soared on the wings of radical ideas, from Polaroid's instant camera to the sharing economy of firms like Airbnb.

Chef Massimo Bottura likewise upended convention in 1995 when he opened his restaurant, Osteria Francescana, in Modena, Italy, and started serving radically reinvented Italian dishes in a culture that placed a premium on tradition. His daring proved no flash in the pan. In 2016, two decades after (barely) surviving the

ire of locals to become a three-Michelin-star destination, Osteria secured the top spot on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants. And it has just been named No. 1 again.

What seemed like a risky move at the time – rebelling against beloved recipes shared across generations – made Bottura a star. That success could have bred complacency, followed by failure, as so often happens in companies across industries. Instead, at Osteria Francescana, success set the stage for further innovation. This restaurant holds two major lessons for organizations around the world that are built on innovation and want to keep their creative edge.

Always keep evolving. Innovative organizations don't worry about how to maintain excellence so much as how to find the new excellence. At Osteria Francescana, dishes are cooked to perfection, but the recipes are never quite finished. Bottura expects his meals to evolve over time.

Consider the signature dish *Le cinque stagionature del Parmigiano Reggiano in diverse consistenze e temperature*, or “the five different ages of Parmigiano Reggiano in five different textures and temperatures.” The idea first came to Bottura 20 years ago as an experiment with different textures and temperatures. Initially, he envisioned “three different ages.” But then “three” became “four,” and, in time, “five.” The dish celebrates what stagionatura, or aging, does to a wheel of Parmigiano. The 24-month-old cheese is made into a hot soufflé, the 30-month-old cheese is made into a warm sauce, the 36-month-old cheese is made into a chilled foam, the 40-month-old cheese is made into a crisp, and the 50-month-old cheese is transformed into a light foam that the kitchen staff calls an “air.” By exploring the fundamentals of how the cheese behaves, Bottura created a dish as dynamic as it is delicious.



Reward novelty over predictability. Bottura keeps his team sharp and engaged by opening their minds to their own potential for creative thinking – and playfulness. For example, he sometimes asks his staff to create dishes based on a piece of music, a painting, or a poem. “I had been here for just a couple of months, and I was getting used to [Bottura’s] style,” Canadian-born chef de partie Jessica Rosval told me when I visited the restaurant. “He burst into the kitchen one day and said, ‘Okay, everybody, new project for today: Lou Reed, *Take a Walk on the Wild Side*. Everybody make a dish.’ And I was just like, ‘Oh my gosh, where do I even start?’”

But Rosval’s initial panic soon turned to excitement. “We created a wide variety of dishes,” she said. “Some people focused on the bass line of the song. Some people focused on the lyrics. Some people focused on the era in which the song was written. We had this diverse array of different plates that were created from this one moment of inspiration when Massimo had been listening to the song in his car.”

When you experience novelty at work, job satisfaction increases, along with creativity and overall performance. Novelty also leads to greater confidence. Some participants in research conducted by psychologists Brent Mattingly of Ashland University and Gary Lewandowski of Monmouth University read a list of facts that included some that were delightfully strange (“Butterflies taste with their feet”); others were presented with facts on the blander side (“Butterflies begin life as a caterpillar”). The former group came away from the exercise feeling more knowledgeable, the researchers found, and more self-assured, and when presented with new tasks, they worked harder on them.

Many workplaces I've studied focus on finding ways to instill uniformity in how employees go about their jobs, when, in fact, novelty should be the priority. In a study of 300 new employees starting jobs across a wide range of companies in the United States in different industries, I found that the more frequently the workers experienced novelty during their first few weeks on the job (because they learned new skills, met new colleagues, or felt challenged by their tasks), the more fulfilled and energized they were in their work and the longer they stayed with the organization. By contrast, when employees reported that their jobs felt "more or less the same every day," they were less satisfied in their work and more eager to move on.

Bottura is a charismatic leader who started his culinary career by breaking rules in a context –Italian cooking – which follows an extremely stringent set of rules: Long pasta goes with seafood sauces, and short pasta with meat ones. Time-honored recipes are not supposed to be questioned or changed. By reinventing traditional Italian dishes, Bottura made his company a success. Not only that, he was able to sustain an environment that encourages rebelliousness over the years. By constantly challenging his staff and asking them to look at dishes and ingredients with a fresh perspective, everyone working at the restaurant embraces the new and expands his or her skills. Their menu is always evolving and so are their talents.

When growth becomes the goal of everyone in the organization, complacency doesn't have time to take root and radical ideas can emerge time and time again.



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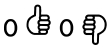
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Steven Wentz 6 months ago

Chef Massimo is an inspiration for leadership. His kitchen is spectacular, but it is his drive to use his celebrity to make a difference in human lives that has brought me to appreciate him. I just put my fiance and I down for a reservation at Osteria Francescana. We are better than 4000 down in waiting, and we will only be in Modena for one day on our honeymoon. But, a chance to see his restaurant and possibly eat at his table is excellent. I hope more and more individuals continue down a path that he is now endeavoring.

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