

The Food of Movement: Anthony Bourdain's Universal Eater

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Bruce Chatwin considered movement the indispensable feature of the human species. Sedentary natures killed through asphyxiation; a refusal to move suggested an acceptance of death. Walking he considered a virtue; tourism the ultimate sin. For the late Anthony Bourdain, a chef turned walker and explorer, no dish was odd enough or peculiar to be avoided or exiled by palate.

Bourdain was certainly of similar inclination to Chatwin – in some respects.

“If I’m an advocate of anything, it’s to move. As far as you can, as much as you can. Across the ocean, or simply across the river. Walk in someone else’s shoes or at least eat their food. It’s a plus for everybody.”

Foods and rites may well be seen as communal acts for the new to be initiated into. But a modern world obsessed with nutritional counters, diet and concerns makes adventurism, quite literally in some cases, hard to stomach. But the wiry Bourdain seemed to have a cast iron stomach, a body impregnable to that various kitchens he sampled. The only thing he would not have eaten, he once quipped, was a cheese burger from Johnny Rockets.

The world of eating and dining can also be hierarchical and exclusive, pegged against an inverse relationship between diminishing returns on a plate and the amount that is splashed out at the till. Common dining remains in a titanic struggle with the elite nibblers who would surely die of starvation in the name of impressions and appearances. While Bourdain was not immune to the Michelin star disease, he was accommodating of a stunning variety of culinary forms.

“Low plastic stool, cheap but delicious noodles, cold Hanoi beer.”

Those were the words former US President Barack Obama in recalling a meeting with Bourdain as part of the *Parts Unknown* series airing on CNN.

His interest in writing about food was also pointedly against the food snobs and the babblers of high end consumption. A. J. Liebling’s *Between Meals* was a favourite of his, describe by Bourdain as an account by “an enthusiastic lover of food and wine, very knowledgeable but never a snob”.

The restaurant is an ideal spectacle for sociological study.

“The man who founded the first restaurant,” observed Brillat-Savarin, “must have been a genius endowed with profound insight into human nature.”

Those manning that haven were the chefs, those gargoyles and creators with the power of creativity – or not – to fashion appearances. Bourdain, however, never forgot that aesthetics was subordinate to the cravings of the belly.

Such a creature was Bourdain whose quarter century as a New York chef served a plate full of delicious, manic and delightfully crafted experiences in *Kitchen Confidential*. In that account published in 2000, Bourdain suggests the aptness of military metaphor in describing the kitchen, a point as sharp as the weapons wielded. Battles are fought, and lost – most of the restaurants he found himself working for went broke. Wounds are inflicted, blood shed.

Cooking habits are given colourful description, suggesting that diners should be imperilled by the chef’s all-too-innovative short cuts.

“If you are one of those people who cringe at the thought of strangers fondling your food, you shouldn’t go out to eat.”

Meals on the assembly line will have “dozens of sweaty fingers” poking, prodding, stroking and shaping. The meal that induces salivation is bound to have a dark, even hideous side.

He also offers the advice that should be part of any diner’s canon: avoid ordering fish on Mondays like the plague, having lingered from the previous Friday. Most definitely avoid any temptation to get the mussels which “are allowed to wallow in their foul-smelling piss in the bottom of a reach-in”.

Bourdain, according to initial reports, seems to have taken his own life in a hotel near Strasbourg while engaged in making another instalment of *Parts Unknown*. The recounting of responses to his death and discussions in tribute pieces inevitably go soppy, drenched by the concerns that the taking of his own life was, essentially, unpardonable. Or at the very least, he should have been discouraged, the darkness expelled by proper counsel and sagacious words.

“Suicide,” goes a piece in CNN, “is a growing problem in the United States.”

The report cites a survey released on Thursday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that suicide rates have spiked by 25 percent across the country over the two decades ending in 2016. That his death caused tremors of despair and loss is an entirely sensible reaction: such gourmands should, on some level, be revered for making food, and food chat, a joy. But Bourdain lived his life so utterly chocked with nutrients, experiences and movement, leaving the eater hopeful that the cravings of the belly are universal and, when satiated, give peace, and peace of mind.

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