

3. Anthony Bourdain, Chef Confidential: The Food World's Bad Boy

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Anthony Michael Bourdain (1956-Present)

Anthony Bourdain is a chef and food writer who became famous after publishing the best-selling book, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, in 2000. Bourdain's candid, colorful language gave the world a glimpse into the seedy, sexy and sometimes self-destructive life of a modern chef. This book led to a career as a food and travel show host for Bourdain, first with his show *A Cook's Tour* on the Food Network & later with his show *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* on the Travel channel. On *No Reservations*, he travels around the world eating expensive specialties, dirt cheap street food and other odd delicacies like a still-beating snake heart in Vietnam, all while filming his adventures and sharing whatever's on his mind.

Bourdain's writing and shows have been called offensive and funny, truthful and insightful. His characteristic outspokenness has caused reporters to brand him as the "anti-celebrity chef." Drinking, smoking, swearing and ranting about whatever celebrity, chef or person is annoying him at the moment, Bourdain breaks away from the standard celebrity chef/food show host model, where most chefs have memorable catchphrases and everything they taste is delicious. He prefers to be more honest and candid than the

average celebrity chef. He isn't afraid to call Food Network star Emeril Lagasse an Ewok or to say that the gelatinous birds nest soup he just ate made him vomit. Colorful language and enthusiasm are key traits for Bourdain, and it is a personality that many people across the world have come to love. Bourdain has managed to use his popularity to speak out about causes he believes in, from the rights of Latin America kitchen workers to the delights of a maple bacon doughnut. He is known for the unique topics he covers and the passion he brings to his work.

THE PRIVILEGED REBEL

Anthony Michael Bourdain entered the world on June 25, 1956 in New York City to the late Pierre Bourdain, an executive in the classical music recording industry, and his wife, Gladys, a stay-at-home mom who later worked as a copy editor for *The New York Times*. Anthony and his younger brother Christopher grew up in Leonia, New Jersey with a privileged upbringing. His family would often take trips to the New Jersey shore, and to the Bourdain family home in the south of France, which almost always included trips to the beach. He credits his father with his love of traveling, and both of his parents for his adventurous eating habits. One of Bourdain's earliest food memories was a yearly ritual of his mother making him roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on his birthday. He also remembers his parents taking him and his younger brother to New York to try new cuisines, like Japanese (something he notes other kids his age did not have in their lives), but Bourdain claims he never paid much attention to the fact that his parents loved food more than the parents of his friends.

His parents' love of books encouraged a young Bourdain to feed his overactive imagination with comic books and pirate stories. As a defiant, intelligent and well-read boy Bourdain enjoyed adventures. He loved breaking the rules, whether he was setting off fireworks to blow up army men or sneaking off for a pilfered cigarette and wine in France. He told one reporter that he was smart, angry and articulate growing up, and he would often utilize his wide vocabulary to manipulate adults into giving him whatever he wanted.

On a family trip to Europe, a 9-year-old Bourdain tasted the first of several life-altering food experiences: vichyssoise, a cold soup of leek and potato. Up to this point he had never had anything but hot soup. The intense flavor of the soup combined with its cool temperature blew his youthful preconceptions of soup out of the water and made him realize that food could be more than just fuel for the body—it could be exciting.

Bourdain's second early gastronomic experience occurred when his parents left him and his brother locked in the car with comic books while they dined at the famous and expensive La Pyramide in France during the same trip. His parents had always included him when dining out despite his finicky eating habits, so this exclusion warned him that picky eating could equal exclusion.

This inspired him to be a more adventurous eater and led to another life-altering food experience on the trip: Bourdain was the only member of his family brave enough to eat a raw oyster on an oyster boat in France. When he saw how the raw oyster completely disgusted his younger brother, and even his adventurous parents, he had a revelation: by eating the oyster, he could both shock his brother and have a stronger stomach than his

parents. These thoughts motivated him to eat the raw oyster, and he loved the salty, briny taste. That one experience taught Bourdain that food could cause people to have strong emotions: joy, motivation, shock, and power. His early understanding of food as a medium for other feelings would help inspire his kitchen career years later.

ENTERING THE KITCHEN

In 1973, Bourdain graduated from his New Jersey high school a year early to follow his love, Nancy Putkoski, to Vassar College. He only lasted two years at Vassar, where he skipped classes, drank too much, did drugs, and played practical jokes on his friends. Bourdain paints a distinct portrait of himself at that time in *Kitchen Confidential*: “I was—to be frank—a spoiled, miserable, narcissistic, self-destructive and thoughtless young lout, badly in need of a good ass-kicking.”¹ During the summer, he joined his friends in Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where they landed him his first real job as a dishwasher at a local restaurant. He eventually moved up to work on the line as a salad cook, and later as a fry cook and broiler cook.

Bourdain loved working with the other cooks, who to him all seemed like criminals with dirty mouths and drug problems. He enjoyed watching them put out 300 plates of food in one night without breaking a sweat. They would work long hours, smoke marijuana and snort cocaine during and after work, and Bourdain admired their stamina. Casual sex with waitresses and customers also seemed to be the norm among the cooks, and this further convinced Bourdain that the kitchen was a fun place to be.

When the restaurant came under new ownership, Bourdain showed up to the interview feeling cocky, expecting to receive a good position in the kitchen. Part of the interview involved working a shift, but not only did he show up overdressed in a suit instead of traditional chef clothing, he also couldn't keep up with the fast pace of the restaurant. His poor performance caused management to knock him down to prep cook (only one step above a dishwasher), which led to merciless mocking from the rest of the kitchen crew. Much like when his parents excluded him for being a picky eater, this experience inspired the defiant Bourdain to become a better chef. He quit Vassar and started at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York in 1975.

Classes at the CIA were fairly easy for Bourdain given his previous kitchen experience. While the rest of his class made stock from scratch, he stayed true to his rebel character and made the best stock in class thanks to the powdered bouillon he smuggled in. When Bourdain heard that a few fellow classmates wanted to construct a sculpture of chocolate, marzipan, pastries and cakes in homage to someone famous for graduation, he also convinced the school to ban any food sculptures by suggesting one so over the top (a beef fat sculpture of Baby Jesus and his mother), they had to prevent others from going that far.

While attending school, Bourdain worked a weekend job at a West Village saloon in New York City. Here he polished his line skills and met one of his culinary mentors--a man he called Bigfoot but has never officially identified. Bigfoot inspired fear and loyalty among his staff, which Bourdain admired. In a professional kitchen, there are many traps for a head chef to watch out for, including employees frequently quitting and vendors

sending incorrect orders, both of which could easily affect profits. Bigfoot would work his employees hard but reward them when they were just about to break. He would scrutinize every food order that came in and wreak havoc on any vendor that brought him the wrong food. Bourdain called this management style the Bigfoot System, a combination of street smarts and micro-management that prevented Bigfoot from getting taken advantage of by anyone, and a system Bourdain would later utilize as the head of his own kitchen.

Halfway through his time at the CIA, Bourdain went back to the restaurant in Provincetown for the summer. There he was inspired by an older chef named Dimitri (last name unknown). Both he and Dimitri shared a love of classical French cooking, and particularly enjoyed the works of Chef Marie-Antoine Carême, a historic chef who had cooked for royalty and was known for creating elaborate, architectural food pieces for dinner parties and functions. The two started a catering company in their free time called Moonlight Menus, and they became known in the area for delivering delicious, overpriced Carême -esque food displays. Amid a whirlwind of drugs, debauchery and catering, Bourdain made so much money he was able to quit his restaurant job that summer.

THE ROAD TO CHEFDOM

After graduating from the CIA in 1977, Bourdain got a job at the Rainbow Room, a restaurant atop Rockefeller Center. He worked as a lunch buffet chef for a year and a half, turning the previous night's leftovers into a delicious, expensive buffet frequented by the rich and elderly. He ran for shop steward of their local union and won, but was

quickly told to step down by management at the restaurant. Bourdain speculated in *Kitchen Confidential* that the previous person in the position had dabbled in organized crime, so he stepped down. Bourdain left the Rainbow Room shortly after that.

From there, Bourdain moved through a series of cooking jobs, consistently moving up to better positions, from dishwasher to line chef to sous chef and eventually, executive chef--but he wasn't happy. As he reminisces in *Kitchen Confidential*, he had an undesirable habit of entering a restaurant when it was already failing, and he blamed his desire for money for keeping him in unfulfilling positions. Instead of trying to get a low-paying job with one of America's culinary masters to learn as much as he could, he went after high-paying jobs with less than ideal bosses, mainly to fund his growing drug habit, which now included heroin. Years later, Bourdain reflected on his drug addiction, calling it a love affair. He recalled reading about LSD and Haight-Asbury when he was as young as 9 years old, and all of the artists he loved were into drugs, so he had his mind set on trying drugs from a young age.

At the tender age of 22, Bourdain became the chef of a new, but failing restaurant in the theater district of New York City. He did what he could to save it, but the place was unsalvageable. It was there that Bourdain learned an important lesson: how to recognize failure. However, it would be years before he knew how to respond to and avoid failing restaurants.

In 1981, a good friend from both high school and Provincetown became the chef of a trendy Soho restaurant that was going under. Bourdain and his former mentor Dimitri assumed sous chefs positions, and numerous friends and former coworkers joined

them. The young chefs did whatever they wanted, which mainly involved doing a lot of drugs and listening to rock and roll. In a memorable scene from *Kitchen Confidential*, Bourdain explains how they would ignite the range top with brandy before each shift started, and do lines of cocaine that were the entire length of the bar after work, crawling on all fours across the bar top. Bourdain jumped ship before the restaurant failed.

PERSONAL AND PUBLIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Slowly he straightened up his life. In his personal life, Bourdain began courting Nancy Putkoski whom he had been dating off and on since high school. In 1985, the couple married. Eventually, Bourdain managed to get off of heroin (but continued doing cocaine) and while using methadone to detoxify his body, he worked another string of terrible jobs. He called these his “Wilderness Years” in *Kitchen Confidential*, when he lost all desire to cook and worked so many different jobs he could hardly keep them straight. He eventually sobered up and worked at several well-known restaurants in the 1990s, including Coco Pazzo Teatro (an Italian restaurant run by famous restaurateur Pino Luongo), Sullivan’s, and the Supper Club. While serving as the executive chef of the Supper Club, Bourdain met Steven (whom he has never officially identified), who would soon become his best friend and long-time sous chef. Bourdain also cooked for several celebrities while working at this restaurant, a far cry from his days as a dishwasher in Provincetown.

Bourdain the Writer

Deciding to dabble in writing, Bourdain published two crime fiction novels while still working as a chef: *Bone in the Throat* (1995), which was set in a kitchen, and *Gone Bamboo* (1997). The books were not overwhelmingly popular, but they gave Bourdain a taste of what life as a writer could be like. He has called fiction writing his release from constantly writing about food and his own life. In 1998, Bourdain was named the executive chef of Les Halles, a French bistro on Lower Park Avenue in Manhattan. A year later, his bosses sent him to Tokyo to open up a Japanese branch of Les Halles.

Bourdain's writing career really took off in 1999, when he wrote an article for the *New Yorker* entitled, "Don't Eat Before Reading This", which provided an explicit look inside the New York restaurant industry. The article was so popular that Bourdain turned it into the book, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, in 2000. Part autobiography, part down-and-dirty look at the life of a chef, the book outlined Bourdain's honest opinions about the strenuous work, and overload of sex, drugs and rock and roll found in a modern American restaurant kitchen. This book became a *New York Times* bestseller and cemented his public persona as a rebel chef without a cause. Fellow cooks and chefs were grateful to find that an insider had written about their world and could commiserate with them. Customers were grateful for the dining rules it provided, such as don't order fish on Mondays and never order a well-done steak.

2001 was another successful year for Bourdain, who was named Food Writer of the Year by *Bon Appétit* magazine for his book *Kitchen Confidential*. He also published two very different books that year. The first book, *Typhoid Mary: An Urban Historical*, retells the story of Mary Mallon, or Typhoid Mary, a cook who infected over 30 people

with the disease at the beginning of the twentieth-century. He tells the story from a chef's perspective, adding his own narrative where history left off. He hypothesized that she became infected and passed the infection on to others rather than take time off because chefs often risk losing their jobs when they stay home sick. His perspective as a chef put an entirely new spin on the historical story. The second book he published that year was another crime fiction novel, *The Chronicles of Bobby Gold*, which tells the story of a man who dates a sous chef and gets on the wrong side of the mob.

Bourdain the TV Star

Because of *Kitchen Confidential's* popularity, Bourdain was able to pitch and sell another book idea: he would travel around the world in search of the perfect meal. He managed to double sell the idea to the Food Network as a television series, so he would be eating, writing and filming all at the same time, something he had never done before. The book published in 2001 and the show produced in 2002 were called *A Cook's Tour*. Countries visited while filming included Portugal, Vietnam, Russia, Morocco, China, Cambodia, Mexico, and Scotland to name a few. In 2002, the British Guild of Food Writers named *A Cook's Tour* the Food Book of the Year.

In the book version of *A Cook's Tour*, Bourdain's writing shifted from funny and honest stories about a chef's life to travel and eating stories. Showing a new side of his storytelling skill, In this book Bourdain shared the fascination and horror he experienced in exotic countries throughout its pages. When writing about the ancient city of Fez in Morocco, for instance, Bourdain offered a more complex look as he weaved his personal experiences in the city with a vivid and engaging gastronomic history of Fez, describing

how its existence as a walled city has influenced the citizens' eating habits and cuisine to this very day.

The television series also depicts his first animal slaughter. He killed a pig in Portugal and he was shocked to find that, despite his typical lust for adventure, he didn't enjoy killing animals. Other uncomfortable moments during the recording of the show included eating his first live snake heart in Vietnam, and his first, and probably last, vegan dinner party in San Francisco (both suggested by his producers). Bourdain has always been quite vocal about his dislike of vegans and vegetarians. As he says in *Kitchen Confidential*, "the only people who seem to really hate me for this book are...vegetarians, but they don't get enough animal protein to get really angry."ⁱⁱ

Despite the book and series' success, Bourdain didn't enjoy working on television shows. He didn't like having a camera crew around constantly and resented being controlled by the Food Network. He found that the network sometimes forced him to get something out of a scene that wasn't there, made him repeat actions, or required him to eat disgusting food, such as the gelatinous birds nest soup in Vietnam, just to get a good shot. They were even there to tape him when the food made him sick.

During this time, Bourdain was named Les Halles' official "chef-at-large," which meant his name was still associated with the restaurant while he travelled and filmed the show. In 2004, he helped publish *Anthony Bourdain's Les Halles Cookbook*. The book, which was full of the restaurant's popular recipes, featured the witty and forward writing style Bourdain had become known for. He wrote the introduction and opening "basics" chapters as if he was training a new employee in his own kitchen, and his language

matches that of a typical busy chef, meaning it is littered with curse words and insults. For example, the section about the history of the restaurant is mockingly entitled “Les Halles: What the Hell is it?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Refining His Craft

After taping two seasons (comprised of twenty-two shows) with the Food Network, Bourdain opted out of doing a third season. He had wanted to tape an entire episode about Spanish chef Ferran Adria, who at that time was the world’s leading chef in molecular gastronomy (a new style of cooking based upon the science behind traditional cooking preparations). Bourdain had gained permission from Adria to tape a show in Adria’s secret workshop and in the restaurant, something no one had ever done before. The Food Network turned down the idea because, according to Bourdain, they wanted to focus on barbecues and tailgating in the third season. Bourdain and his crew including camera people/producers Lydia Tenaglia and her husband Chris Collins parted ways with their production company and the Food Network, and paid for the week of filming with Adria out of their own pockets. In 2006 they packaged the footage as a DVD called *Decoding Ferran Adria* which has since been viewed worldwide.

After parting ways with the Food Network, Bourdain went through a few life changes. First, in 2005 he split up with his wife of 20 years, Nancy Putkoski, and alluded to his traveling around the world as the cause for the divorce. That same year, Bourdain and his crew produced a new show with the Travel channel entitled *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*. Much like the chefs who had followed him earlier in his career, the

crew from *A Cook's Tour* remained loyal to Bourdain and followed him onto the set of *No Reservations*.

Bourdain has had more creative liberty with his show *No Reservations*, and although the concept of traveling around the world and eating is similar, the end product is very different from his first series. Instead of focusing on “the best of” or “the real” story about a country like most food travel shows do, this show concentrated on whatever Bourdain and the crew experienced. They understand they could not cover everything, so they focused on making the viewers feel like they were traveling with the crew. They occasionally shot or edited a show to mimic their favorite directors, such as John Woo and Martin Scorsese, and strove to make each show different from the last. The same year *No Reservations* was created, Bourdain wrote a sitcom for Fox Network based on and titled after his first book, *Kitchen Confidential*. Several episodes aired in 2006, but the show was cancelled before the first season finished.

Bourdain and the *No Reservations* crew were filming in Beirut, Lebanon in July 2006 when the 2006 Lebanon War broke out, a military conflict between Lebanon and Northern Israel that lasted just over a month. He and his crew had enjoyed a few delicious meals and were overwhelmed by the proud and happy citizens that wanted to show off their newly restored country. Yet, as the days passed and he saw the airport bombed multiple times, Bourdain knew this would be a very different show, and he worried about how they would get home. They were evacuated to a hotel near the American Embassy for a week, where they were close enough to hear the bombings day

and night. Bourdain and his crew, along with other Americans, evacuated to the USS Nashville, where they stayed for another week.

According to Bourdain, he and the crew looked for hope from then-President Bush, but the only news clip they received was of Bush eating a buttered roll and ignoring Tony Blair, who Bourdain claims was trying to get him to focus on the events in Lebanon. This one clip stamped down the hopes of Bourdain and his crew. They attempted to film as much as they could, but primarily, they sadly watched as the city of Beirut suffered terrible losses and damage. They eventually made it home safely, and in August 2006, their footage was aired. It wasn't a happy episode, but according to Bourdain, it was honest.

Bourdain published his seventh book in 2006, *The Nasty Bits*, a collection of essays written for various publications, such as *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Gourmet Magazine*, the *Observer*, and the *Financial Times*. This book covers a wide-range of food-related topics. In it, Bourdain discusses current restaurant trends, such as famous chefs opening casual eateries, and offers up a few profiles of especially intriguing chefs. He tells a few tales from the kitchen, outlines his favorite books to read for motivation in the kitchen, and of course, mocks other celebrity chefs. This time, chef-turned-reality-TV-star Rocco DiSpirito and raw food received the brunt of his anger.

One of the articles in *The Nasty Bits* showcases a cause Bourdain adamantly supports: Latin American rights in the kitchen. In *Kitchen Confidential*, he spoke often about how Mexican immigrants make up a majority of the staff in the kitchens of restaurants all around the United States. In *The Nasty Bits*, Bourdain wrote a piece

honoring Mexican kitchen staff after he hosted The James Beards Awards (a prestigious U.S. culinary awards event). Despite the fact that many restaurant kitchens around the United States employ and are even run by Latin Americans, none were in attendance at the awards ceremony, a situation Bourdain found offensive. He suggested that the United States open up immigration to Central and South America, if only to keep our country full of hard working, talented chefs.

2007 was another landmark year for Bourdain. His *No Reservations* Beirut episode was nominated for an Emmy Award. Then in April, he married his Italian girlfriend, Ottavia Busia, and did what he vowed only a year before, in an article in *The Observer*, that he would never do: he had a child. His daughter Ariane was born on April 9, 2007. The birth of his daughter inspired him to stop smoking (mostly) and, as one reporter noted, he attempted to refrain from using profanity. Bourdain has also made an effort to have his family travel with him on safe, family-friendly locations like Italy and London. He published his eighth book, *Anthony Bourdain No Reservations: Around the World on an Empty Stomach* in 2007. This latest work is more of a photo essay than travel memoir of his *No Reservations* experiences, interspersed with some of his writing.

But the year 2007 again brought negative publicity for Bourdain. That year a revealing photo of Bourdain surfaced in the book, *My Last Supper: 50 Great Chefs and Their Final Meals* by Melanie Dunea. Dunea wanted to capture the spirit of the chefs she photographed, so when it came time for Bourdain, she suggested a photo where he was completely nude, smoking a cigarette and holding nothing but a massive beef bone in front of his private parts. As Bourdain notes in the introduction of the book (which he

wrote), this photo was created because he had yet to learn an important lesson, which is to never make important career decision after a few drinks.

Over the years, Bourdain has been on several television shows as himself, including *Late Night with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *Nova*, and several episodes of the reality game show, *Top Chef*. Bourdain also wrote a blog based on his experiences on *Top Chef*, and in 2008, was nominated for a Webby Award for "Best Blog Cultural/Personal." In 2009 Bourdain continued his work on *No Reservations*, as it entered it's six season, and wrote for various publications. His writing has also appeared on food writer and friend Michael Ruhlman's blog from time to time. In 2009, Bourdain's show, *No Reservations*, was nominated for three Emmy awards for Outstanding Cinematography for Nonfiction Programming & Outstanding Picture Editing for Nonfiction Programming for their Laos episode, and Outstanding Nonfiction Program.

Anthony Bourdain started off as a disgruntled chef with a nasty drug habit, but over the years has transformed into a respected food writer and television show host. In the cooking world, he went from working at failing restaurants to running and writing the cookbook for Les Halles, a well-known French brasserie in Manhattan. Bourdain's food writing has also matured over the years, starting off with entertaining and frightening stories from a professional kitchen and ending with insight into ancient and modern cultures around the globe. Thanks to his blunt and forward manner, Bourdain's quality and style of television shows has evolved from a cookie-cutter Food Network show to

gutsy accounts of eating and cooking around the world. Bourdain has truly become an icon of the modern American food world.

ⁱ Bourdain, Anthony. *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*. New York: HarpersCollins Publishers, Inc, 2000, p.19.

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