

Scouring the world for real food and real life, this swashbuckling chef will sample any dish that's offered. He'll smile, swallow and take intestinal risks, but never insult his host.



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## THE AUDACIOUS ADVENTURES OF

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# ANTHONY BOURDAIN

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BY ANN FARMER • PHOTOGRAPH BY BRADLEY MEINZ

**IN** HIS GLOBAL TRAVELS AS the daredevil host of *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, the author and chef has consumed fermented shark, sheep testicles and the occasional ant egg omelet. But while lunching on

home turf recently, this culinary adventurer craved only steak-frites, minus the fries. "All I want to see on my plate is the steak," Bourdain told a waiter at a French bistro he frequents on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Bourdain had flown in the previous evening from a cold and wet Czech Republic, where he'd spent a week eating dumplings and goulash and "drinking a lot of beer." It was all for an episode of his series on the Travel Channel, where season six debuts January 11. In just four days he would be kissing his wife and young daughter goodbye again and hopping a plane to Ecuador, for another shoot and another pillaging of the local specialties.

"I have the best job in the world," says Bourdain, tucking into the rare hanger steak placed before him. During his past five

seasons on the show, he's traveled to more than eighty countries, exploring various cultures through their cuisine, but also providing ample helpings of each region's history and politics, its quirks and characters.

"It's always through my view. It makes for very self-indulgent television," says Bourdain, whose hip bad-boy persona, wisecracking dialogue and no-holds-barred approach has endeared him to viewers. He considers it his duty to routinely subvert any expectations on the part of the network and audience (and even himself) for what his series should look and sound like.

"I'm sorry if anyone thinks that when we do a destination that we're going to do a 'best of' the place, or a fair and balanced or thorough assessment," says Bourdain, who opts for off-the-beaten-path eateries where he can get down with the locals.

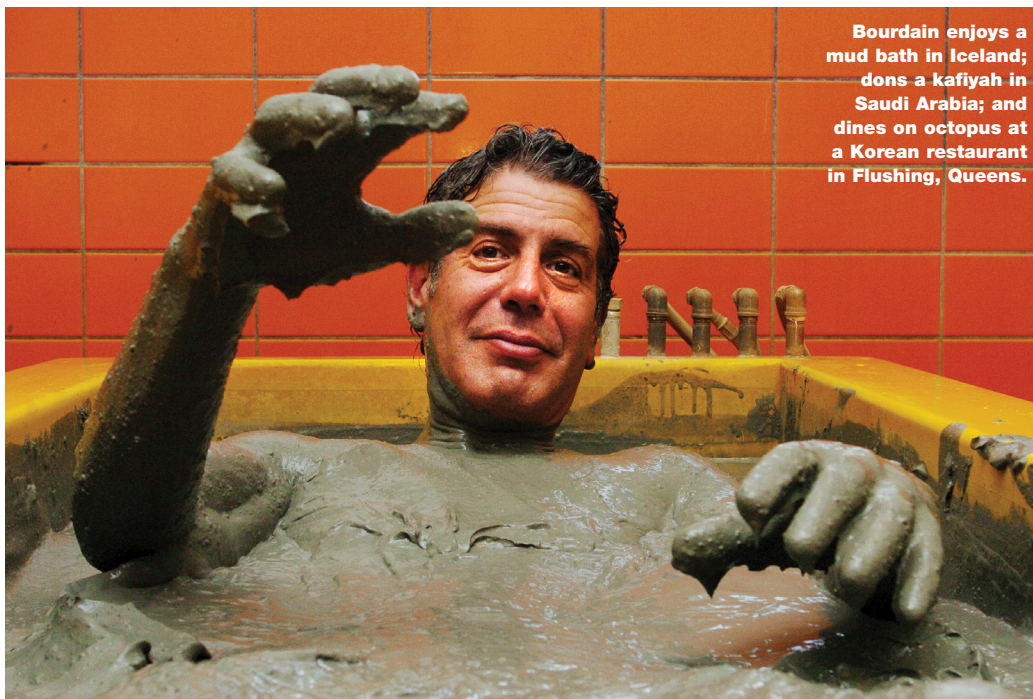
"We eat at food stalls and in people's homes," he says. "For three or four minutes of tape, we're hanging out for hours — petting the dog, playing with the kids, getting drunk with grandma. If we show up at a scene and the people are all dressed in ethnic garb, we're rolling with no film in the camera. If the





The chef, photographed at Café d'Alsace in New York City.





Bourdain enjoys a mud bath in Iceland; dons a kafiya in Saudi Arabia; and dines on octopus at a Korean restaurant in Flushing, Queens.



tourism board is meeting us with a local band, it's doomed. If we're at a house and getting shit-faced and singing karaoke, that's when we're rolling."

And that's how the network likes it.

"We don't give Tony any instructions when shooting," says Charlie Parsons, who executive-produces the show for Travel Channel. He explains that Bourdain gets leeway to go where he wants, say what he wants and do what he wants.

Sure, his salty language often requires bleeping in the edit room. And a parental advisory precedes each episode. But providing Bourdain a long rope seems to be in everyone's best interests.

"That's why the show's so successful," Parsons says. "He calls it like he sees it. He doesn't like to tap dance around anything."



## His love affair with food began at adolescence with his first "glistening, vaguely sexual-looking" oyster.

Even a trip to Iceland — "possibly the most boring place on earth," Bourdain reports — turns entertaining when a dogsled ride to an icy tundra for a picnic (which includes smoked puffin) results in Bourdain taking refuge in a cave to escape a white-out. As so often happens, the local firewater appears and his black humor comes out: "I'm thinking of peeing in my pants just to warm up."

On the other hand, for an episode in Laos, which won a Primetime Emmy this year for outstanding cinematography, Bourdain took a notably sober look at its magical, fog-drenched landscape, still littered with unexploded bombs dropped by the U.S. during the Vietnam War.

"You'll notice I'm not myself in this episode. Where's the snark, the attitude?" Bourdain says in a voiceover before sitting down to eat a home-cooked meal with a man who lost an arm and a leg after accidentally unearthing unexploded ordnance on his farm.

Bourdain writes the scripts. And his voiceovers are often the best part. In Uzbekistan, for instance, where every meal seems to

consist of kebab or *plov* (grain), he heads to the spa for a deep tissue massage. Mounted by a burly masseuse, who pummels and wrenches his body into pretzel shapes, he protests (via voiceover) that the workout would be "in any other situation, prohibited by the Geneva Convention."

Viewers hear the enhanced sound of cracking bone and popping tendons as his voiceover continues: "Interrogation specialists will tell you that every man has his breaking point. I've just about reached mine. I'll say anything you want. Rachael Ray is a brilliant cook. The Chicken McNugget is healthy and delicious."

"He's an extremely funny man," says Christopher Collins, who, with Lydia Tenaglia, executive-produces the show for Zero Point Zero Production, the company that also produced Bourdain's Food Network series, *A Cook's Tour*. Collins says that even when shoots are going poorly, "Tony is extremely quick, intelligent and giving," not to mention punctual. "It's unnerving when the talent beats you to the lobby each morning."

Bourdain and his crew also like to riddle the shows with pop-culture references. For Hong Kong, they imitated director Wong Kar-wai's frenetic camera style. For the Venice shoot they alluded to Nicolas Roeg's Anglo-Italian horror film, *Don't Look Now*.

"Cleveland is a direct homage to [the 2003 film] *American Splendor*," Bourdain says. "Every episode is always about what can we do technically and stylistically that we haven't done before."

At the same time, they like events to unfold spontaneously. While shooting an episode about Tex-Mex border cuisine, Bourdain zigzagged over the Rio Grande on a motorcycle (as in the 1992 Robert Rodriguez film *El Mariachi*). One minute he was going *mano-a-mano* with a ten-gallon Texan over who could stomach the hottest salsa. The next, he was ferreting out the origins of nachos, always pushing the standards-and-practices envelope: "What do you say we go back to the van and do a couple of bong hits?" he jokes with his crew.

After he stumbles across a Mexican immigrant on the U.S.





side supporting his Mexican family as a sushi chef, of all things, they scramble back over the border to dine with his folks. “As the story unfolded, we said, ‘We’ve got to go see his family,’” Collins recalls. “We may go out with a game plan, but more often than not it goes right off the page.”

At times reckless, Bourdain has jumped off a cliff in Sicily into water of indeterminate depth. He’s rolled an ATV over himself. In Cambodia, he had a gun shoved into his face. Ever the gracious guest, he never turns down food for fear of insulting his host.

“Never,” he says, even if he has some regrets about the unwashed warthog rectum he ate in Namibia. “I paid a price for two weeks after,” he adds, describing a nasty bacterial infection that ensued.

“Tony’s stomach must have lead lining,” says Collins, remembering the incident. They were visiting a bush tribe that lives on the edge of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. Six-foot-four-inch Bourdain joined the tiny tribesmen as they hunted a warthog with bows and arrows, then butchered and roasted it on burnt embers.

“Tony has a good poker face,” Collins says. “He wolfed it down. There was a little glint in his eye that said, ‘This is tough to take, but we’ll take it.’”

Bourdain developed a lot of his toughness and street smarts from the years he spent in restaurant kitchens — working his way up from dishwasher in a Provincetown, Massachusetts, seafood joint to executive chef at Brasserie Les Halles in New York City. “I went through the grinder like everyone else,” he says. “I was a bike messenger at fourteen, a drug addict in the ’80s.”

His love affair with food began at adolescence with his first “glistening, vaguely sexual-looking” oyster. After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in 1978, Bourdain bounced from one professional chef position to another — a job he likens to captaining a pirate ship of misfits. At one point he found himself selling his most treasured belongings on the streets of New York at Christmas to buy drugs. “You learn a lot of painful lessons,” he says. “I’m good at evaluating things on the street — people’s real intentions.”

With his sardonic wit and trenchant eye, Bourdain always had a knack for keeping his crews amused. “There’s an oral tradition in kitchens to be entertaining and funny,” he says, explaining how he decided ten years ago to write about some of his behind-the-scenes experiences for a free city newspaper. “I hoped for nothing more than to entertain people in the business,” he says.

When his story was bumped, he submitted it to the venerable *New Yorker* magazine. “I got a book deal two days later,” he adds, referring to his 2000 *New York Times* bestseller, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*.

“Everything changed overnight,” says Bourdain, who was forty-four at the time. “I thought it would be a cult book. I was still standing in the kitchen with workdays of twelve hours or more. I didn’t see how I could make a living other than doing that. The success of that book made it possible.”

Fortunately, his literary success came at a mature age. “By then I knew that cocaine is not going to make you any happier.”

He’s since written nine books of fiction and non-fiction, including the bestseller *The Nasty Bits*. His next work of nonfiction is tentatively titled *Medium Raw*. He sometimes appears on other television shows, including Bravo’s *Top Chef*, where he’s been a guest judge and award-nominated blogger. Fans recognize him wherever he goes. (His Italian in-laws were caught off-guard by his actual voice after hearing his dubbed voice on Italian television.)

Despite his success, Bourdain has no plans to change his style. “You’re not going to see me going into a restaurant, saying, ‘What do you *mean* you don’t have a table? Don’t you know who I *am*?’”

For the upcoming season of *No Reservations*, Bourdain and his crew are producing twenty-two episodes that will require 180 days on the road. At press time, the potential destinations included the Congo, Cuba, China, Rome, Beirut and Vietnam.

“I’m looking to have a good time doing it and be proud of it later,” Bourdain says. If nothing else, he hopes that viewers pick up a passport and some good travel tips. “Be nice to the locals. I like to pass that on. If you have a limited time in Venice, don’t spend it standing in line with a tourist group.” ■