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**Chew On This**  
**Anthony Bourdain: Tales From Hell's Kitchen**

Margaret Ambrose  
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Anthony Bourdain would eat lamb's balls, but he wouldn't eat bear's claws. He'd eat tiger penis soup – but only if it wasn't an endangered species of tiger. He would never eat live monkey brain ("I couldn't hurt a little monkey"), but he would – and recently did – eat a live, pulsating cobra's heart. He wants us to know that he's not scared of food, but if all he reveals in his gritty exposé of the restaurant kitchen scene, *Kitchen Confidential* is to be believed, you don't imagine there's much that would scare this man.

*Confidential* is to be believed, you don't imagine there's much that would scare this man.

Bourdain, who has worked for 25 years as a chef in some of the swankiest and dodgiest restaurants in New York, has spilled his guts in a hyperbole-filled, testosterone-pumped, tell-all story about the life of a chef and all the scumbags and riff-raff he's shared his kitchen with. Served with a meaty side order of blood, drugs and sex, *Kitchen Confidential* is part memoir, part historical tour of New York restaurants, and part collection of thoughts-of-the-day a la Bourdain: *Your body is not a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride and Vegetarians are the enemy of everything good and decent in the human spirit.*

"I did my best to be offensive. I find it a totally obnoxious book," Bourdain explains without shame. "I'm proud of the book. I get sick of myself now and again, but then it is me talking. I would love to say that it was a torturous process to write but it was pretty easy – a sustained rant. That's the way I talk in the kitchen."

"I deliberately wanted to write it in kitchenese. I wanted it to sound like me a little bit drunk on a Saturday night after a really busy shift, talking to other cooks. I wanted it to sound authentic and recognisable to my fellow professionals. I wrote it thinking, at best, it would be a cult item for professionals in the States – maybe there would be a few food-smeared copies kicking around in kitchens. I really did not anticipate that it would be a big success, and I didn't expect how many civilians – meaning non-restaurant people – would read it."

These days the concept of the celebrity chef might be a bit ho-



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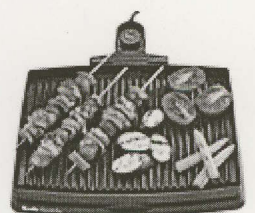
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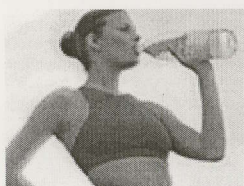
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he's 43 but he looks old, he's ugly, and he's a tad scary. He's got kitchen cred, man. And he's got more than one very sharp knife attached to him. It's an image he's proud of. "I think Iggy is cool – that's the way to grow old gracefully."

Bourdain relishes describing in vivid and sometimes disturbing detail, the filthy, mad cooks, out of control on amphetamines and heroin, of which he was one. "When I started out, drugs were everywhere - absolutely top to bottom. The whole business from the ownership to the dishwashers."

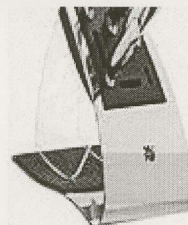
And then there was the sex. Like most cult books or movies, there's the moment in *Kitchen Confidential* where you stop and think, nope, he's pushed it too far – I don't believe that. It's the Bride Story. Let's just say it involves a wedding party coming into the restaurant and the bride being so enraptured by the food and the chef who prepared it that not long into the evening, she's slipped out of the party, he's abandoned his post, and they're in the carpark doing the Big Nasty. "A lot of people don't believe that story," he says. "But it's true. You have to remember, it was the seventies, man."

It's over twenty years down the track, and Bourdain is not the same man. Like the washed up rockers he's so often compared to, beneath the rough exterior and past-behavior that legends are made of, there's the new Bourdain. The Bourdain who won't allow drugs in his kitchen, who is happily married, and who claims that one of the best things about having an international best seller is his ability to afford comprehensive health insurance and save a bit of a nest egg for his twilight years.

The chef comes clean, read on...

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The long hours of cocaine and heroin-induced frenzy came to an end when he found himself sitting in the street in the snow, selling his possessions for drug money, surrounded by friends who had been badly beaten in some drug deal gone wrong. He turned his back on his addict friends ("It was hard to leave those guys behind, but I didn't want to die.") but found that the kitchen environment wasn't something he needed to leave behind. It was actually helpful in his recovery.

"I think for a recovering drug addict it's perfect – it's one of the few businesses that will have you. As long as you can get it together to show up on time and do a good job, you know, you could have two heads. It's a very forgiving business in that respect – there are a lot of recovering drug addicts in my corner of the world."

Bourdain often makes a military analogy for life in the kitchen – there's a hierarchy, and specific duties, which, he says, means your day-to-day life is reliant on others. "You're working shoulder to shoulder with people in a small, hot, confined space for most of your waking hours, every day. One of the things that I love about the business is that you have all these very different people from different backgrounds thrown together, and you're forced to become intimate and rely on each other in a very beautiful way."

Bourdain maintains it was the structured lifestyle of the kitchen that not only enabled him to become clean, but also to discover his own skills. "I am as much in love with the lifestyle and my crew and the idea of running a day to day operation, as I am with food."

It's a lifestyle that has also enabled him to produce such an acclaimed book. "I don't know if I could have been a writer without being a chef first. Writing requires discipline. If I had to put writing as another thing I do today, I don't know if I would have the urge."

While the culture of the kitchen is his "true love", it's a place he's not planning on spending every waking hour in the future. Although he still has the role of Executive Chef, at the New York brasserie, Les Halles, he's got more fingers in the pie.

"I'm working on a book called *The Cook's Tour* which will also be a television show, where I eat my way around the world –



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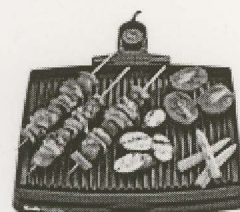
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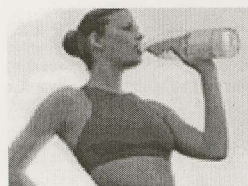
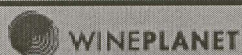
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also been eating some humble home cooking. In Mexico I went to visit relatives of my cooks – most of them come from this area – and I visited their Moms and their Grandmothers and I just ate simple country food."



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It was in Vietnam that the unfortunate cobra lost his heart to Bourdain. "Yep, zipped right out of the cobra tableside," he laughs. "It was kind of like a hyperactive mussel. My waiter, who was handling the cobra, had a bandage on his hand, which didn't exactly fill me with confidence. But I wasn't scared."

To say that no food frightens Bourdain wouldn't be entirely true. "Generic cooking scares me – restaurants where the food tastes exactly the same in Melbourne as it does in Tulsa, Oklahoma - that disturbs me. I like the idea that cuisine reflects its region or neighbourhood."

"I'm also a little frightened by the trend towards what the French have been calling *laboratoire* – you know, lab food, hyper-sanitary testing laboratories making food. While this may be the wave of the future, it makes me feel old and out of touch, and a little bit frightened of the future."

***Kitchen Confidential* by Anthony Bourdain is published by Bloomsbury Publishing and retails for \$29.95.**

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