

ANTHONY BOURDAIN



Medium

A BLOODY VALENTINE
TO THE WORLD OF FOOD
AND THE PEOPLE

Raw



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A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and Mark People Who Gook

ANTHONY BOURDAIN



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ALSO BY ANTHONY BOURDAIN

Nonfiction

Kitchen Confidential A Cook's Tour Typhoid Mary Anthony Bourdain's Les Halles Cookbook The Nasty Bits No Reservations

Fiction

Bone in the Throat Gone Bamboo Bobby Gold

PRAISE FOR *Medium raw* and anthony bourdain

"Bourdain has insight, access and good taste, and he's a naturally engaging writer. . . . Bourdain is a hopeless romantic when it comes to food and the people who cook."

—New York Times Book Review

"Mr. Bourdain is a vivid, bawdy and often foul-mouthed writer. He thrills in the attack, but he is also an enthusiast who writes well about things he holds dear. His detailed reporting on the backroom lives of restaurant employees is terrific."

—Wall Street Journal

"Bourdain's prose at his wildest can sound like Hunter S. Thompson's, yet he can also produce much quieter work, such as 'My Aim Is True,' a brilliant portrait of Justo Thomas, the man who fillets the fish for Le Bernardin, New York's great seafood restaurant. A. J. Liebling couldn't have done it better. Above all, when you read Bourdain, you never quite know what's going to happen in the next sentence, but you can be sure you're in for a treat, a shock, a surprise. . . . Anyone who starts the book is liable to lose all control and simply gobble it right up."

—Washington Post

"The standout chapter in the book is 'My Aim Is True,' which describes the work and life of Justo Thomas, who cuts and portions at least 700 pounds of fish every day at Le Bernardin, the New York seafood restaurant. . . . Bourdain observes and describes Thomas in wonderfully fine detail. . . . You have to hand it to Bourdain; this is really good writing, not just really good food writing."

—San Francisco Chronicle

"Bourdain's strong voice carries from the camera directly to the page—he's sarcastic, profane, bombastic, unapologetic."

—Los Angeles Times

"Bourdain is a true populist, as interested in celebrating the most humble wok-slinger as he is in extolling the superchef. If his sharp eye and his wicked tongue have brought him acclaim, what has kept him in the spotlight is his heart. Like Oscar Wilde, he is a moralist in the guise of a libertine. Long may he prosper."

—Denver Post

"This is Bourdain at his best. His food-porn vignettes are guaranteed to make your mouth water."

—Miami Herald

"The Kitchen Confidential author is a father now, but he hasn't cleaned up his language, lost his zesty appetite or his critical zing."

—Time magazine



On the whole I have received better treatment in life than the average man and more loving kindness than I perhaps deserved.

—Frank Harris

recognize the men at the bar. And the one woman. They're some of the most respected chefs in America. Most of them are French but all of them made their bones here. They are, each and every one of them, heroes to me—as they are to up-and-coming line cooks, wannabe chefs, and culinary students everywhere. They're clearly surprised to see each other here, to recognize their peers strung out along the limited number of barstools. Like me, they were summoned by a trusted friend to this late-night meeting at this celebrated New York restaurant for ambiguous reasons under conditions of utmost secrecy. They have been told, as I was, not to tell anyone of this gathering. It goes without saying that none of us will blab about it later.

Well . . . I guess that's not exactly true.

It's early in my new non-career as professional traveler, writer, and TV guy, and I still get the vapors being in the same room with these guys. I'm doing my best to conceal the fact that I'm, frankly, star-struck—atwitter with anticipation. My palms are sweaty as I order a drink, and I'm aware that my voice sounds oddly high and squeaky as the words "vodka on the rocks" come out. All I know for sure about this gathering is that a friend called me on Saturday night and, after asking me what I was doing on Monday, instructed me, in his notice-

ably French accent, that "Tuh-nee . . . you must come. It will be very special."

Since leaving all day-to-day responsibilities at my old restaurant, Les Halles, and having had to learn (or relearn)—after a couple of book tours and many travels-how to deal, once again, with civilian society, I now own a couple of suits. I'm wearing one now, dressed appropriately, I think, for a restaurant of this one's high reputation. The collar on my shirt is too tight and it's digging into my neck. The knot on my tie, I am painfully aware, is less than perfect. When I arrived at the appointed hour of eleven p.m., the dining room was thinning of customers and I was discreetly ushered here, to the small, dimly lit bar and waiting area. I was relieved that upon laying eyes on me, the maître d' did not wrinkle his nose in distaste.

I'm thrilled to see X, a usually unflappable figure whom I generally speak of in the same hushed, respectful tones as the Dalai Lama—a man who ordinarily seems to vibrate on a lower frequency than other, more earthbound chefs. I'm surprised to see that he's nearly as excited as I am, an unmistakable look of apprehension on his face. Around him are some of the second and third waves of Old Guard French guys, some Young Turks-along with a few American chefs who came up in their kitchens. There's the Godmother of the French-chef mafia . . . It's a fucking Who's Who of the top tier of cooking in America today. If a gas leak blew up this building? Fine dining as we know it would be nearly wiped out in one stroke. Ming Tsai would be the guest judge on every episode of Top Chef, and Bobby Flay and Mario Batali would be left to carve up Vegas between themselves.

A few last, well-fed citizens wander past on their way from the dining room to the street. More than one couple does a double take at the lineup of familiar faces murmuring conspiratorially at the bar. The large double doors to a private banquet room swing open and we are summoned.

There's a long table, set for thirteen people, in the middle of the

room. Against the wall is a sideboard, absolutely groaning under the weight of charcuterie—the likes of which few of us (even in this group) have seen in decades: classic Careme-era terrines of wild game, gallantines of various birds, pâté, and rillettes. The centerpiece is a wild boar pâté en croute, the narrow area between forcemeat and crust filled with clear, amber-tinted aspic. Waiters are pouring wine. We help ourselves.

One by one, we take our seats. A door at the far end of the room opens and we are joined by our host.

It's like that scene in The Godfather, where Marlon Brando welcomes the representatives of the five families. I almost expect our host to begin with "I'd like to thank our friends the Tattaglias . . . and our friends from Brooklyn . . ." It's a veritable Apalachin Conference. By now, word of what we're about to eat is getting around the table, ratcheting up the level of excitement.

There is a welcome—and a thank-you to the person who procured what we are about to eat (and successfully smuggled it into the country). There is a course of ravioli in consommé (quite wonderful) and a civet of wild hare. But these go by in a blur.

Our dirty plates are removed. The uniformed waiters, struggling to conceal their smiles, reset our places. Our host rises and a gueridon is rolled out bearing thirteen cast-iron cocottes. Inside each, a tiny, still-sizzling roasted bird—head, beak, and feet still attached, guts intact inside its plump little belly. All of us lean forward, heads turned in the same direction as our host high pours from a bottle of Armagnac, dousing the birds—then ignites them. This is it. The grand slam of rare and forbidden meals. If this assemblage of notable chefs is not reason enough to pinch myself, then this surely is. This is a once-in-a-fucking-lifetime meal—a never-in-a-lifetime meal for most mortals—even in France! What we're about to eat is illegal there as it's illegal here. Ortolan.

The ortolan, or emberiza hortulana, is a finch-like bird native to

Europe and parts of Asia. In France, where they come from, these little birdies can cost upwards of 250 bucks a pop on the black market. It is a protected species, due to the diminishing number of its nesting places and its shrinking habitat. Which makes it illegal to trap or to sell anywhere. It is also a classic of country French cuisine, a delight enjoyed, in all likelihood, since Roman times. Rather notoriously, French president François Mitterrand, on his deathbed, chose to eat ortolan as his putative last meal, and a written account of this event remains one of the most lushly descriptive works of food porn ever committed to paper. To most, I guess, it might seem revolting: a desperately ill old man, struggling to swallow an unctuous mouthful of screamingly hot bird guts and bone bits. But to chefs? It's wank-worthy, a description of the Holy Grail, the Great Unfinished Business, the Thing That Must Be Eaten in order that one may state without reservation that one is a true gastronome, a citizen of the world, a chef with a truly experienced palate—that one has really been around.

As the story goes, the birds are trapped in nets, then blinded by having their eyes poked out—to manipulate the feeding cycle. I have no doubt that at various times in history this was true. Labor laws being what they are in Europe these days, it is apparently no longer cost-effective to employ an eye-gouger. A simple blanket or a towel draped over the cage has long since replaced this cruel means of tricking the ortolan into continuingly gorging itself on figs, millet, and oats.

When the birds are suitably plumped up—with a desirable layer of thick fat—they are killed, plucked, and roasted. It is claimed that the birds are literally drowned in Armagnac—but this, too, is not the case. A simple whiff of the stuff is enough for the now morbidly obese ortolan to keel over stone-dead.

The flames in the cocottes burn down, and the ortolans are distributed, one to each guest. Everyone at this table knows what to do and how to do it. We wait for the sizzling flesh and fat before us to quiet down a bit. We exchange glances and grins and then, simultane-

ously, we place our napkins over our heads, hiding our faces from God, and with burning fingertips lift our birds gingerly by their hot skulls, placing them feet-first into our mouths—only their heads and beaks protruding.

In the darkness under my shroud, I realize that in my eagerness to fully enjoy this experience, I've closed my eyes. First comes the skin and the fat. It's hot. So hot that I'm drawing short, panicky, circular breaths in and out—like a high-speed trumpet player, breathing around the ortolan, shifting it gingerly around my mouth with my tongue so I don't burn myself. I listen for the sounds of jaws against bone around me but hear only others breathing, the muffled hiss of rapidly moving air through teeth under a dozen linen napkins. There's a vestigial flavor of Armagnac, low-hanging fumes of airborne fat particles, an intoxicating, delicious miasma. Time goes by. Seconds? Moments? I don't know. I hear the first snap of tiny bones from somewhere near and decide to brave it. I bring my molars slowly down and through my bird's rib cage with a wet crunch and am rewarded with a scalding hot rush of burning fat and guts down my throat. Rarely have pain and delight combined so well. I'm giddily uncomfortable, breathing in short, controlled gasps as I continue, slowly—ever so slowly—to chew. With every bite, as the thin bones and layers of fat, meat, skin, and organs compact in on themselves, there are sublime dribbles of varied and wondrous ancient flavors: figs, Armagnac, dark flesh slightly infused with the salty taste of my own blood as my mouth is pricked by the sharp bones. As I swallow, I draw in the head and beak, which, until now, had been hanging from my lips, and blithely crush the skull.

What is left is the fat. A coating of nearly imperceptible yet unforgettable-tasting abdominal fat. I undrape, and, around me, one after another, the other napkins fall to the table, too, revealing glazed, blissed-out expressions, the beginnings of guilty smiles, an identical just-fucked look on every face.

No one rushes to take a sip of wine. They want to remember this flavor.

Flashback, not 100 many years. Close enough in time to still vividly remember the smell of unchanged Fryolator grease, the brackish stank of old steam-table water heating up, the scorched odor of a griddle caked with layers of ancient Mel-Fry.

It didn't smell like ortolan.

I was working a lunch counter on Columbus Avenue. It was a "transitional" phase in my career, meaning I was transitioning from heroin to crack, and I was wearing a snap-front, white polyester dishwasher shirt with the name of the linen service over the left breast pocket, and dirty blue jeans. I was cooking pancakes. And eggs fucking Benedict—the English muffins toasted under the salamander on one side only, half-assed, 'cause I just didn't care. I was cooking eggs over easy with pre-cooked bacon rewarmed on the griddle, and sunny-side ups, and some kind of a yogurt thing with nasty fruit salad and granola in it. I could make any kind of omelet with the fillings available, and the people who sat at my counter and placed their orders looked right through me. Which was good, because if they really saw me, really looked into my eyes, they'd see a guy who-every time somebody ordered a waffle—wanted nothing more than to reach forward, grab them by the hair, and drag a dirty and not particularly sharp knife across their throat before pressing their face into the completely fucked-up, always-sticky waffle iron. If the fucking thing worked anywhere near as inefficiently as it did with waffles, their face would later have to be pried off with a butter knife.

I was, needless to say, not a happy man. I had, after all (as I reminded myself frequently), been a chef. I had run entire kitchens. I had once known the power, the adrenaline rush of having twenty to thirty people working for me, the full-tilt satisfaction of a busy

kitchen making food that one could (at least for the time and circumstances) be proud of. When you've known the light caress of Egyptian sailcloth against your skin, it's all the more difficult to go back to poly—particularly when it's adorned with the linen company's logo of a fat, smilingly accommodating chef twirling his mustache.

At what seemed at the time to be the end of a long, absurd, strange, wonderful but lately awful road, there was nothing to be proud of. Except maybe the soup. I made the soup.

It was goulash.

So I was scraping home fries off the griddle with a spatula and I turned around to plate them up next to an order of eggs over hard when I saw a familiar face across the room. It was a girl I knew in college, sitting down at a rear table with friends. She had been, back then, much admired for her fabulousness (it being the '70s and fabulousness having then been the greatest of virtues). She was beautiful, glamorous—in an arty, slightly decadent, Zelda Fitzgerald kind of a way, outrageous, smart as hell—and fashionably eccentric. I think she let me fondle her tit once. She had, since college, become a downtown "personality," poised on the brink of an apparent success for her various adventures in poetry and the accordion. I read about her frequently in the alternative paper of the day. I saw her and tried, instinctively, to shrink into my polyesters. I'm quite sure I wasn't actually wearing a peaked paper cap—but it sure felt like I was. I hadn't seen the girl since school, when I, too, it had appeared to some, had a career trajectory aimed somewhere other than a lunch counter. I was praying she wouldn't see me back there but it was too late. Her gaze passed over me; there was a brief moment of recognition-and sadness. But in the end she was merciful. She pretended not to have seen.

was ashamed of that counter then, I'm thinking. But not now.

From this rather luxurious vantage point, the air still redolent of

endangered species and fine wine, sitting in a private dining room, licking ortolan fat off my lips, I realize that one thing led directly to the other. Had I not taken a dead-end dishwashing job while on summer vacation, I would not have become a cook. Had I not become a cook, I would never and could never have become a chef. Had I not become a chef, I never would have been able to fuck up so spectacularly. Had I not known what it was like to fuck up—really fuck up—and spend years cooking brunches in bullshit no-star joints around town, that obnoxious but wildly successful memoir I wrote wouldn't have been half as interesting.

Because—just so we all understand—I'm not sitting here at this table among the gods of food because of my cooking.

Dessert arrives and it's Isle Flotante. A simple meringue, offering up its charms from a puddle of crème anglaise. Everybody roars with delight at this dino-era classic, as old school as it gets. We bask in the warm glow of bonhomie, of our shared appreciation for this remarkable meal. We toast our good fortune with Calvados and Cognac.

Life does not suck.

But the obvious question lingers. I know I'm asking it quietly of myself.

What the fuck am I doing here?

I am the peer of no man nor woman at this table. None of them—at any time in my career—would have hired me, even the guy sitting next to me. And he's my best friend in the world.

What could my memoir of an undistinguished—even disgrace-ful—career have said to people of such achievements? And who *are* these people, anyway? Leaning back in their chairs, enjoying their after-dinner cigarettes, they look like princes. Are these the same losers, misfits, and outsiders I wrote about?

Or did I get it all wrong?

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Selling Out

Was so supremely naive about so many things when I wrote Kitchen Confidential—my hatred for all things Food Network being just one of them. From my vantage point in a busy working kitchen, when I'd see Emeril and Bobby on the tube, they looked like creatures from another planet—bizarrely, artificially cheerful creatures in a candy-colored galaxy in no way resembling my own. They were as far from my experience or understanding as Barney the purple dinosaur—or the saxophone stylings of Kenny G. The fact that people—strangers—seemed to love them, Emeril's studio audience, for instance, clapping and hooting with every mention of gah-lic, only made me more hostile.

In my life, in my world, I took it as an article of faith that chefs were unlovable. That's why we were chefs. We were basically . . . bad people—which is why we lived the way we did, this half-life of work followed by hanging out with others who lived the same life, followed by whatever slivers of emulated normal life we had left to us. Nobody