

The untold truth of Anthony Bourdain

By [Cat Lafuente](#)

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The culinary world was shook to its core when it was announced on June 8, 2018 that celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain had [passed away](#) at age 61 of an apparent suicide.

Arguably one of the more sardonic chefs out there, Anthony Bourdain established himself as a multi-faceted and world-traveled aesthete with a deep affection for food, community, and regional traditions — and a collection of major pet peeves and deep-seated opinions that he wasn't afraid to share with the world at large. But he wasn't always known for being an intellectual silver fox who [hobnobs with President Obama](#) over a beer, or for being cool enough to [call Iggy Pop a personal friend](#). And he wasn't always the most respected man in the kitchen. That took years of hard work and cultivation, and long hours spent cooking, thinking, and writing. As we mourn for the loss of America's favorite bad boy chef, here are some parts of Anthony Bourdain's story you might not know.

He was a recovering addict



It's no secret that substance abuse [runs rampant](#) in the food service industry. Anthony Bourdain often talked about that fact firsthand, as he developed a serious problem with drugs while working in kitchens many years ago. Most significantly, he developed a [heroin addiction](#), which he managed to kick in the 1980s. He also smoked [crack cocaine](#), which brought him to a really low point. On a [Reddit AMA](#), he wrote that he found himself "combing the shag carpet for paint chips in the hope that they were fallen crack bits," and "smoking them anyway." He quit that too.

Unlike many addicts, who give up any and all substances when they get clean, Anthony Bourdain continued to drink alcohol, which is why you might have seen him pounding shots of soju in South Korea, or enjoying beers with many of his meals. He knew it was unusual, writing that, "Most people who kick heroin and cocaine have to give up on everything. Maybe cause my experiences were so awful in the end, I've never been tempted to relapse."

His adventurous taste started as a rebellious phase



Bourdain did not emerge from the womb with a charcuterie platter in his right hand and a dirty martini in the left. He actually came from relatively [humble origins](#) in New Jersey, where he was raised on standard American cuisine like meatloaf and burgers. But he was intrigued by the smells that would drift upstairs to his room when the adults were hosting dinner parties downstairs. And when his family traveled abroad, his curiosity only grew. He told *The Guardian* that he responded to being left out of adult dinners by his parents with a culinary rebellion of sorts. "I reacted by requesting oysters and dishes they found repulsive and becoming increasingly adventurous in my tastes. It wasn't about the food but about getting a reaction." So his sophisticated, adult palate had its origins in the angsty cravings of a cranky kid.

His first job was as a dishwasher



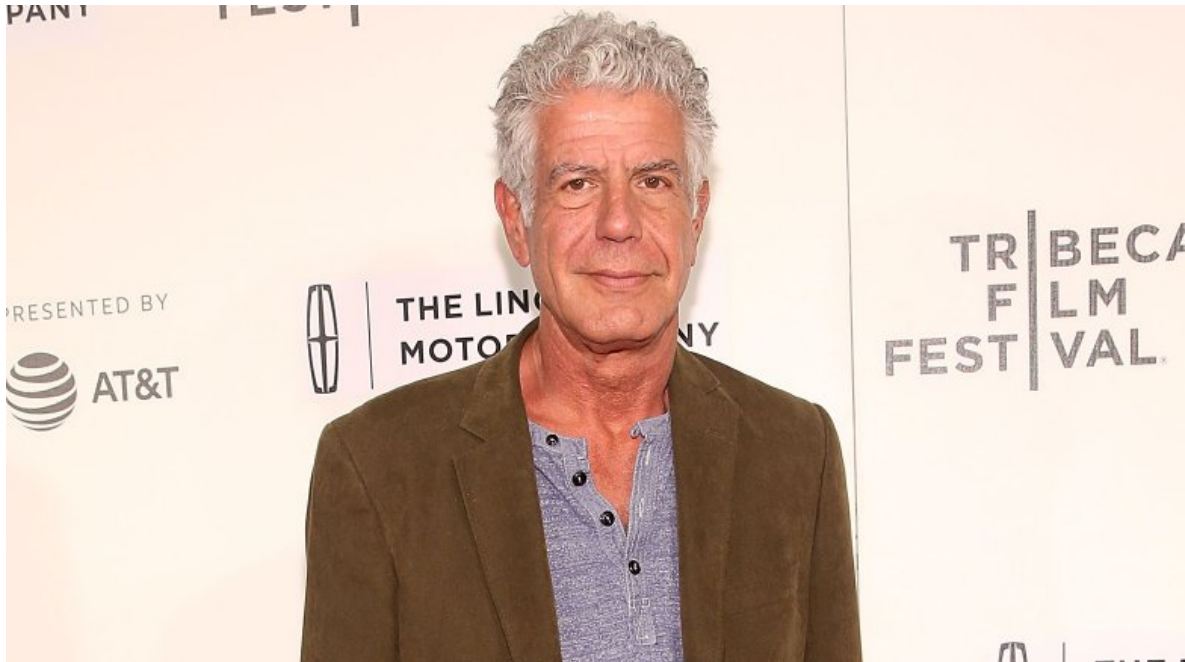
Bourdain [cut his teeth](#) in the restaurant business as many people do, standing in front of a sink full of dirty dishes and hot water. And whereas that kind of backbreaking work isn't for everyone, Bourdain found a real sense of purpose in it, and subsequently stuck with it. At the time, he was a self-professed "shy, goofy, awkward teenager" as he told *The Guardian*, and this was the first instance in which he was given a job that made total, objective sense to him. And the ability to perform the job well, accomplishing any tasks given to him within the job description, allowed him to flourish under the tutelage of people he both respected and admired. It makes sense that he stuck around after that.

He didn't drink at home



If you've watched Anthony Bourdain drink his way around the world on *Parts Unknown*, you might be inclined to think that he hit the bottle on a regular basis. But surprisingly, he didn't guzzle cases of beers on Friday nights, or even have wine with dinner. Rather, he just didn't drink at home. He told [Men's Journal](#), "You see me drink myself stupid on my show all the time. And I have a lot of fun doing that. But I'm not sitting at home having a cocktail. Never, ever. I don't ever drink in my house." Instead, he preferred to keep his home life separate from his carousing, professional life. He continued, "When I indulge, I indulge. But I don't let it bleed over into the rest of my life."

A trip to Japan changed his life



The list of countries that Bourdain travelled to is impressive, covering all [seven continents](#). But he did do a bit of travel before he became a famous chef who globetrots for a living. So what was it that made him want to do more in life and see more of the world? Bourdain told [Men's Journal](#) that his "first trip to Japan — a couple of years before *Kitchen Confidential* — was absolutely life changing. It was like my first acid trip. It was that mind-expanding and climatic [sic]." That's because he was able to see the world in an entirely new way. He continued, "I went there thinking there were a certain amount of primary colors. I came back knowing, in fact, there were 10 or 12 more. It made me want to do things. It showed me there was so much more in the world than I had any idea about — there was so much to learn and there was so much stuff out there." That's proof that travel can indeed be transformative.

He was an ardent practitioner of jiu-jitsu



If you watch *Parts Unknown* on a regular basis, you're privy to the fact that Anthony Bourdain was in good shape — you have to be in order weather antarctic temps, for example. And in some episodes, you can [see him in action](#) as a practitioner of the martial arts, specifically the Brazilian form of jiu-jitsu. And that wasn't just for television, either, as he really did practice on a regular basis. As he [told Nuvo](#), "I train every day, wherever I am in the world. When I'm in New York, I train at the Renzo Gracie Academy, an hour private and then an hour and a half general population. That's basically Fight Club." That shows just how committed to the practice he was — well, that and [his abs](#).

He would eat just about anything



Bourdain dined with everyone from [Libyan rebels](#) to [celebrity chefs in Ethiopia](#), and was always pretty open-minded about what was tasty, or even palatable. It's not surprising, given that a major part of his job was to visit the most far-flung places and dine with locals who eat a diversity of cuisine, some of which can inspire some heavy culture shock. And while he remained unfazed when it came to everything from [bull penis to live snakes](#), there was some cuisine that intimidated him. He told *Fresh Air* that he [got concerned](#) when "freshness and hygiene is a question." Additionally, he identified "rotten food, food that's clearly not clean, water that's clearly not good" as his major culinary challenges. Other than that, he was "pretty much good with just about everything." But his most reviled food was a bit surprising. He continued, "for sheer, soul-destroying misery, like the — you know, if you're talking about a bite of food that just makes me question the future of the human race and just sends me into a spiral of depression, I think eating at an airport *Johnny Rockets* pretty much would be the nadir." Coming from a man who's eaten pig bung, that's saying something.

He wasn't successful until his 40s



It's hard to look at videos of Bourdain [noshing](#) at *Noma* and imagine him struggling to pay his bills or scrounging for rent money. But he spent years busting his hump in the kitchen, worrying if he'd be able to get by. He told [Biography](#) that at age 44, he was "standing in kitchens, not knowing what it was like to go to sleep without being in mortal terror. I was in horrible, endless, irrevocable debt. I had no health insurance. I didn't pay my taxes. I couldn't pay my rent." But that did change for him. He continued, "It was a nightmare, but it's all been different for about 15 years. If it looks like my life is comfortable, well, that's a very new thing for me." Clearly those long, uncertain years left their mark on him.

Kitchen Confidential gave him his big break



Everything [changed](#) for Bourdain when his first cookbook *Kitchen Confidential* was published, catapulting him out of the world of kitchen obscurity and into the world of celebrity. The book, which was credited with revolutionizing the entire genre of food writing, was so well-received that he no longer had to slave in a kitchen for 12 or more hours every day.

So how did the book come to be? It started when he wrote a short piece inspired in part by George Orwell, and in part by his chef lifestyle. He told [Fresh Air](#), "I just wanted to write about my life from the point of view of a working journeyman chef of no particular distinction, honestly." And that writing caught the attention of the *New Yorker*, who published the piece a short time later, which set everything in motion. He continued, "I had a book contract — a book deal within days. And when the book came out, it very quickly transformed my life — I mean, changed everything."

He was passionate about food waste

As a rule, Bourdain said he wasn't prone to advocacy, but when it came to food waste, he threw his full weight into raising awareness about it. That's because every year, one-third of all food produced for human consumption never gets eaten. That alarming statistic was the impetus that inspired Bourdain to join the team behind the documentary *Wasted* as an [executive producer](#). In an interview on [Here & Now](#), he noted that, "this is an issue, that goes fundamentally against my instincts as a longtime working cook and chef, where we were taught from the very beginning that one just does not and cannot and must not waste food."

And he believed that everyone can do something to combat food waste. He continued, "It begins in a sense with, how do we value the things we eat? It begins

with just starting to pay attention to how much food you're buying, how much you are actually using, what you are doing with it." That awareness can go a long way.

He knew he could have done better for women in the industry



Men everywhere are having a [diversity of reactions](#) to the Harvey Weinstein scandal, and Anthony Bourdain was one of them. His girlfriend, Asia Argento, is among the many women who have said [they were assaulted](#) by Weinstein, and Bourdain said that brought it home for him. He told [Slate](#), "I've been seeing up close—due to a personal relationship—the difficulty of speaking out about these things, and... that certainly brought it home in a personal way that, to my discredit, it might not have before." So he did some soul-searching regarding how he could have done more for women in his own industry. He continued, "What have I, how have I presented myself in such a way as to not give confidence, or why was I not the sort of person people would see as a natural ally here? So I started looking at that." Clearly, then, he acknowledged the role he played in perpetuating "meathead culture," and was visibly trying to be better in the future.

He softened in some of his feuds



There are a few choice things Anthony Bourdain was known for, and feuding with other celebrity chefs was one of them. He [threw down](#) on everyone from Bobby Flay to Rachel Ray, leveling his peers with colorful and profane barbs. But in recent years it seemed that Bourdain might be calming down a bit, spending less time trash talking and more time focusing on his own work. For one, some of his [more recent](#) insults of his number one foe, Guy Fieri, were tamer than those of years past. And he'd been mum about Paula Deen for some years now, which is a [huge change in tack](#) from his previous, soul-eviscerating critiques of her. He even [headlined a festival](#) with Emeril Lagasse in January of 2017, showing that he had calmed in that regard too.

He had a disdain for brunch



Although brunch is [more popular](#) in America today than it's ever been, especially in Bourdain's home state of New York, he just wasn't into it. That was due mostly to the many years he spent slinging brunch in restaurant kitchens, sometimes at his lowest points. He told [Fresh Air](#) that at times, "it was the only work I could get. And I came to hate the — you know, when you're cooking 300 omelets a day and, you know, scraping waffles out of the waffle iron and making French toast and pancakes and, you know, cooking hundreds of pounds of home fries, those smells, those associations, those were very painful times — you know, addiction, post-addiction." Clearly he did not cherish those memories. He continued, "You know, I was a desperate man, often working under a pseudonym when I was cooking brunch. So I really hated it. And I also hated the whole concept of brunch."

He didn't fry his bacon



Bourdain always had his own way of doing things in the kitchen, and that was true even with the simplest of tasks. Unless you've picked up a copy of Anthony Bourdain's newest cookbook [Appetites](#), you might be surprised to learn that he didn't prepare bacon by frying it. Rather, in an unorthodox move, he preferred to roast it in the oven. This came as a surprise to Dave Davies during a [Fresh Air](#) interview, when Bourdain said that frying is, "just not the best way to evenly cook bacon. We all like — most of us like crispy bacon or at least evenly cooked. And the best way to do it in my experience and the way we always did it in restaurants was to lay it out on a baking parchment and put in the oven and cook patiently but evenly, turning occasionally because there are hotspots in ovens." Always quick with a joke, Bourdain warned of the perils of frying bacon, which can be dangerous "particularly if you're naked, never fry bacon while naked."