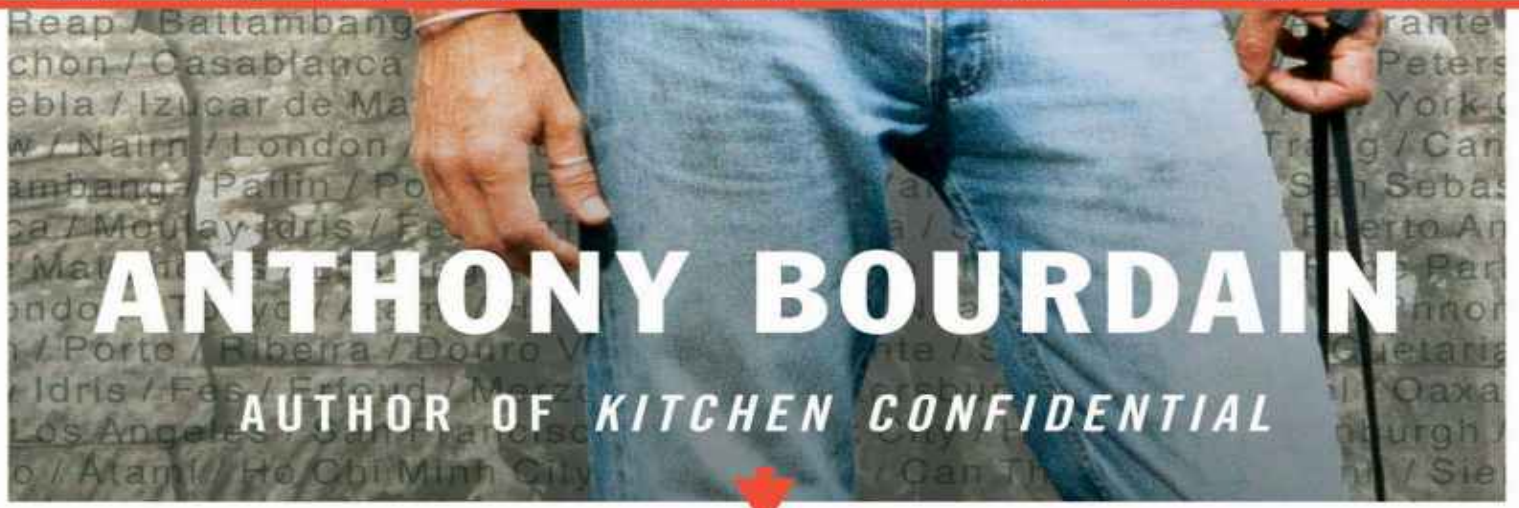


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A COOK'S TOUR

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT MEAL



ANTHONY BOURDAIN

AUTHOR OF *KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL*

To Nancy

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Dear Nancy,

I'm about as far away from you as I've ever been – a hotel (*the* hotel, actually) in Pailin, a miserable one-horse dunghole in northwest Cambodia, home to those not-so-adorable scamps, the Khmer Rouge. Picture this: a single swayback bed, a broken TV set that shows only fuzzy images of Thai kick-boxing, a tile floor with tiles halfway up the wall and a drain in the middle – as if the whole room were designed to be quickly and efficiently hosed down. There's one lightbulb, a warped dresser, and a complimentary plastic comb with someone else's hair in it. In spite of the EZ Clean design features, there are suspicious and dismaying stains on the walls. About two thirds of the way up one wall, there are what look like bloody footprints and – what do they call it, arterial spray? How they got there, so high up, I can only guess. The wall opposite has equally sinister stains – evidence of a more opaque substance – these suggesting a downward dispersal. Having seen the bathroom, I can't blame the perpetrator for anything.

There are no smiles in this town, just glares of naked hostility. The clothing of choice is the moldering remnants of military-issue fatigues. There is a 'karaoke' booth in the lobby, next to the standard pictogram of an AK-47 with a red line through it (no Automatic Weapons in the Lobby). 'Karaoke' means, presumably, that the bison-sized women lounging around by the front desk with their kids are available for purposes of sexual diversion. The best-looking one is a dead ringer for Hideki Irabu. (We traded that lox to Toronto, didn't we? Or was it Montreal?) My Khmer translator, who has hardly opened his mouth since we entered Khmer Rouge territory, says that the last time he stayed here, during the last coup, he got a terrible skin rash. He intends, he says, to sleep standing up. Now he tells me . . .

Could you maybe make a doctor's appointment for me for when I get back? I'm thinking a full workup, to be on the safe side. I've been wading in water – and drinking it – from the kind of worst-case scenarios you read about in the guidebooks and travelers warnings. Needless to say, some of the food I've been eating – well, the food handling has been . . . dubious, at best. Is liver fluke curable? I don't think they gave me a shot for that. I miss you. I miss the cat. I miss my own bed, *The Simpsons* at 7:00 and 11:00. I could really go for a cold beer. A pizza. Some chopped liver from Barney

Greengrass. Toilets that don't double as showers. I'll call you when I get back to Phnom Penh or Battambang.

Love you.

Tony

Introduction

I'm sitting cross-legged in the bush with Charlie, deep in the Mekong Delta, drinking Vietnamese moonshine from a plastic cola bottle. It's dark, the only light coming from a single generator-powered lightbulb, and on the tarpaulin of stitched-together fertilizer and rice sacks laid out on the hard jungle floor in front of me, dinner has just been served: a humble farmer's meal of clay-roasted duck, duck and banana-blossom soup, salad, and stuffed bitter melon. My host, affectionately referred to as 'Uncle Hai,' sits to my left, his right hand clutching my knee. Every once in a while he gives it a squeeze, just to make sure I'm still there and that I'm having a good time.

I am having a good time. I'm having the best time in the world. Across from me, a ninety-five-year-old man with a milky white eye and no teeth, who's wearing black pajamas and rubber sandals, raises a glass of the vicious homemade rice whiskey and challenges me to yet another shot. He's a war hero, I have been assured. He fought the Japanese, the French; he fought in the 'American War.' We exchange respectful salutations and both hammer back a shot.

The problem is, nearly everybody at this meal is also, apparently, a war hero. The delta was an incubation chamber – a hotbed of VC activity during our country's time here – and everybody, one by one, wants to have a drink with me. Grampa, directly across from me, his legs tucked comfortably under his body like a supple sixteen-year-old's, has raised his glass in my direction six times already, fixing me in the gaze of his one unclouded eye, before knocking back another shot. Almost immediately, someone else tugs on my sleeve.

'Please, sir . . . the gentleman down there . . . he is also a great war hero. He would like to drink with you.'

I look down the length of the makeshift picnic blanket to a tough-looking guy, fortyish maybe, with thick neck and forearms. He's staring right at me, not shy at all, this one. He's smiling, too – though not exactly the same warm, friendly smile Grampa's been giving me. This smile says, I've killed a few of your kind, you know. Now, let's see if you can drink.

‘I’m right here, Cool Breeze,’ I say, trying not to slur. ‘Come and get me.’ Then I give him my baddest-ass Dirty Harry, jailhouse stare while I drain another glass of what I am quickly coming to believe is formaldehyde.

Three Communist party officials from the Can Tho People’s Committee, picking at salads with chopsticks, watch with interest as the silly American, who came all this way – by plane, by car, by sampan – to eat clay-roasted duck with a rice farmer and his family, slugs back his twelfth shot of the evening and looks worriedly around the clearing at all the other war heroes waiting to do the same. There are about twenty-five men crowded around the tarpaulin, sitting with their legs folded tightly, tearing at duck with their chopsticks and watching me. The women serve, looming up out of the darkness with more food, more liquor, and the occasional sharp word of advice.

Don’t make him carve the duck! I imagine they’re saying. He’s American! He’s too stupid and clumsy! In America, everything arrives carved already! He won’t know what to do! He’ll cut himself, the idiot, and shame us all! A paper plate arrives with a small paring knife and another sizzling-hot duck: head, feet, bill, and guts intact. I position the thing as best I can with burning fingers, wrestle not too gracefully with it for a few seconds, and manage to remove legs, breasts, and wings in the classic French tableside style. I crack open the skull so my friend Philippe can scoop out the brains (he’s French; they like that stuff) and offer the first slice of breast to my host, Uncle Hai.

The crowd is pleased. There’s a round of applause. Behind me, children are running around, playing in the dark. A while ago, there were only a few of them. But as news of the American visitor and his French friend spread, their number has swelled – as has the number of dinner guests. They’ve been arriving all night from surrounding farms. In groups of two and three, they’ve been coming from the river, pulling up in their narrow boats and disembarking at Uncle Hai’s tiny landing. They’ve walked single file down the packed-silt riverbank, the dried-mud causeway that serves as both jungle highway and levee, part of an intricate, centuries-old irrigation system that extends for hundreds of square miles. Occasionally, a small child will appear at my elbow to stroke my hand or pinch my skin, seemingly amazed at the color, the hair on my arms. There is a look of absolute wonder and confusion on his face, as if, perhaps, older friends dared him to go pinch the Giant American Savage who once bombed and

strafed the village, but now comes in peace to eat duck and drink rotgut with these patriotic heroes. A while ago, I had my Sally Struthers moment, posing for a photograph with about twenty of them, before allowing them to chase me around the clearing with a lot of fake Hong Kong martial-arts moves, then letting them tie me up with a length of twine – to much squealing of delight.

The duck is a little tough, and smoky-tasting from the mound of burning straw it's been cooked in; and the Mekong whiskey is going down like drain cleaner. I'm worried about what I'm going to do when all this alcohol hits me, how I'm ever going to get back on that narrow, wobbly boat in the middle of the night, make my way downriver through the absolute blackness of the jungle, disembark (while still retaining verticality) across a bamboo and mangrove monkey bridge to a sleepy Stone Age hamlet, then, in a shared car, bounce over twisting narrow jungle track and shaky wooden bridges to Highway 1 and Can Tho without blowing chunks all over the three representatives of the People's Committee.

I don't want to disgrace my clan. I don't want my gracious and genial hosts to see me stumble or fall. I don't want to get hauled away from this meal on a stretcher, my head hanging over the side of the sampan, drooling bile into the black water. I've got something to prove. We may have lost the war. We may have pointlessly bombed and mined and assassinated and defoliated before slinking away as if it were all a terrible misunderstanding – but, goddamn it, we can still drink as good as these guys, right?

Looking across at Grampa, who's refilling his glass while a toddler crawls onto his lap, I'm not so sure. Screw it. I'm having a good time. I smile at the old man and hold up my glass. I like him. I like these guys. Since coming to Asia, I've never met such a great group of people. It's been food, folks, and fun like I've never experienced. These are, by Vietnamese standards, party animals – warm, generous, thoughtful, kind – occasionally very funny, sincere in both their hospitality and their fierce pride. I don't want to leave. I want to do this all night.

One of the younger war heroes at the other end of the tarp suddenly stands up, and the other guests stop chattering as he breaks into song. Accompanied by a clapped-out guitar, he sings, his palms held together as if praying, looking out over our heads, as if singing to someone in the jungle. It's beautiful, a heartfelt, sweet-sounding, absolutely haunting invocation, and in the dim light from the single bulb, he looks angelic. No one makes a

sound while he sings, but I manage to whisper a question to the translator on my right.

‘What’s he singing about?’ I ask.

‘It is a patriotic song,’ he says, ‘about the people of this village, the farmers and their families who hid the soldiers and helped them during the American War. About the difficulties they faced. And their courage.’

‘Oh,’ I reply.

I know the song is basically about killing my kind – and not too terribly long ago – but I’m absolutely riveted. I’m charmed. I’m flattered. I have been treated, in the last few hours, with never-before-encountered kindness and respect. Uncle Hai gives my knee another squeeze. The old man across from me smiles and raises his empty glass to me, summons a younger man to refill it, gestures that he should do the same for me. A swollen moon appears from behind puffs of cloud, hangs heavily over the tree line beyond the river. Other guests are arriving. I can hear them in the distance, their sandals and bare feet padding softly along the hardened silt, emerging from the darkness to take places around the tarpaulin.

I wanted the perfect meal.

I also wanted – to be absolutely frank – Col. Walter E. Kurtz, Lord Jim, Lawrence of Arabia, Kim Philby, the Consul, Fowler, Tony Po, B. Traven, Christopher Walken . . . I wanted to find – no, I wanted to be – one of those debauched heroes and villains out of Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Francis Coppola, and Michael Cimino. I wanted to wander the world in a dirty seersucker suit, getting into trouble.

I wanted adventures. I wanted to go up the Nung River to the heart of darkness in Cambodia. I wanted to ride out into a desert on camelback, sand and dunes in every direction, eat whole roasted lamb with my fingers. I wanted to kick snow off my boots in a Mafiya nightclub in Russia. I wanted to play with automatic weapons in Phnom Penh, recapture the past in a small oyster village in France, step into a seedy neon-lit *pulquería* in rural Mexico. I wanted to run roadblocks in the middle of the night, blowing past angry militia with a handful of hurled Marlboro packs, experience fear, excitement, wonder. I wanted kicks – the kind of melodramatic thrills and chills I’d yearned for since childhood, the kind of adventure I’d found as a little boy in the pages of my Tintin comic books. I wanted to see the world – and I wanted the world to be just like the movies.

Unreasonable? Overromantic? Uninformed? Foolhardy?

Yes!

But I didn't care. I'd just put down a very nice score with an obnoxious and overttestosteroned account of my life in the restaurant business. Inexplicably, it had flown off the shelves. I was paying rent on time for the first time in my life. I had, amazingly, health coverage at long last. I actually had money in the bank and the goodwill of a publisher on my side. After a few months of traveling the English-speaking world, flogging my book, giving the same witless three-minute interview over and over and over again, I was no longer a useful factor in the day-to-day operations of my kitchen. My cooks had long since begun calling me 'Pinchay Famoso' and making fun of me when I'd show up slathered in TV makeup after yet another segment showing me warning the public about 'fish on Monday' and the 'perils of hollandaise.' I needed something to do. I needed another idea for a book – preferably while I was still in good odor from the last one. I may love cooking, and I certainly love the life of the professional chef, but I did not, at age forty-five, forty-six, or ever again, want to find myself slopping out brunches in some West Village café when my knees went completely and my brain turned, finally, to mush.

'How about this?' I suggested to my editor. 'I travel around the world, doing whatever I want. I stay in fine hotels and I stay in hovels. I eat scary, exotic, wonderful food, doing cool stuff like I've seen in movies, and looking for the perfect meal. How's that sound?'

That sounded like a good business plan, right? I'd comb the world looking for the perfect mix of food and context. Upriver in Southeast Asia to eat snakes and bird's nests, back to La Teste for a bowl of *soupe de poisson*, scale the mountains of the new haute cuisine – the French Laundry in Napa Valley, I hadn't eaten there yet! That Arzak guy in Spain – all the cooks are talking about him. I'd look and look, and eventually I'd find the best meal in the world – according to me anyway – and I'd write about it.

Of course, I knew already that the best meal in the world, the perfect meal, is very rarely the most sophisticated or expensive one. I knew how important factors other than technique or rare ingredients can be in the real business of making magic happen at a dinner table. Context and memory play powerful roles in all the truly great meals in one's life. I mean, let's face it: When you're eating simple barbecue under a palm tree, and you feel sand between your toes, samba music is playing softly in the background,