

# London Review of Books

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## A Man's Man's World

### Steven Shapin

- *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* by Anthony Bourdain

One of the defining sites for modern social science was the doorway dividing the kitchen from the dining-room in an early 1950s Shetland hotel. On the kitchen side of the door casually employed crofters swiped their filthy fingers through any passing pudding they found particularly toothsome; smelly socks hung steaming on tea-kettles; and butter partially unused by guests was reshaped for later diners' consumption. On the dining-room side all was smoothly polished presentation, or, being realistic, as smooth as one could expect from hostelries in the Highlands and Islands at the fag-end of rationing. Circulating freely between kitchen and dining-room was the young Canadian American sociologist Erving Goffman, who had come all the way from Chicago to observe what passed across the boundary between stage performance and backstage preparation. That kitchen stood proxy for all the social world's backstages. If the passage between that kitchen and that dining-room created a desired illusion, then social life was indeed possible. 'The man who founded the first restaurant,' Brillat-Savarin judged, 'must have been a genius endowed with profound insight into human nature.'

Writing almost twenty years ago in these pages, Alan Bennett paid tribute to the hair-trigger sensitivity of Goffman's eye and ear: 'Whole novels take place in footnotes' (*LRB*, 15 October 1981). Much of what Goffman saw and heard was available to anybody – though it mainly skipped their notice – but much was normally unattainable because the doors were closed to those without authorised rights of passage. 'I go to sociology,' Bennett said, 'not for analysis or explication but for access to experience I do not have and often do not want': 'Sociology

begins in the dustbin.' With equal plausibility, he might have said that it begins in the kitchen, a private place in which 'gobbing scullery boys' and their Fawltly bosses rarely try, and even more rarely succeed, in making magic. Only now you don't need a sociologist to throw open the kitchen doors and show you the mess inside: the chefs, too, are spilling their beans.

*Kitchen Confidential* records Anthony Bourdain's progress from drug and sex-crazed *plongeur* at a modest Cape Cod seafood restaurant (fried clams and chips) to executive chef at Les Halles, a proletarian-chic Manhattan brasserie whose very name advertises its commitment to 'authentic French working-man's fare' (steak and chips). From restaurant kitchens along the way come the shock-horror revelations (drugs, bugs and buggery, basically) that are the book's biggest selling points and which, with the boost of a *New Yorker* *amuse-bouche* titillatingly titled 'Don't Eat before Reading This', propelled *Kitchen Confidential* onto the American bestseller lists.

Never order the fish on a Monday: it's almost certainly Thursday's fish dodgily preserved. Waste not, want not is the first of the restaurant's Decalogue. The same goes for anything called the 'special': mainly recycled odds and sods of dubious provenance. Don't have the mussels unless you know the chef or can secure the services of a good personal injury lawyer: 'More often than not, mussels are allowed to wallow in their own foul-smelling piss in the bottom of a reach-in.' Nobody Bourdain knows 'has ever made Hollandaise to order'. Bacteria just love to make babies in it, and the butter that goes into the Hollandaise was probably (shades of Shetland) table leavings, 'heated, clarified, and strained to get out all the breadcrumbs and cigarette butts'. (Do they really still smoke in Manhattan?) Perhaps most alarming for a nation of lipophobes are the quantities of butter, tons of lovely, artery-clogging butter everywhere: it's what makes the food taste so good. As with the fishes, so with the loaves. Dine late and be certain that many other diners' hands have already fondled your focaccia. Order your steak well-done and, unlike Marco Pierre White, Bourdain won't throw you out of the restaurant: he'll only give you the rankest piece of meat going. You

probably don't want to know about the rodents. And if all this unsettles your delicate sensibilities, then 'tant pis, man'.

'God sends meat, but the devil sends cooks' (as the proverb has it), and the staff perpetrating these horrors are no better than they ought to be. Not *all* line cooks are 'wacked-out moral degenerates, dope fiends, refugees, a thuggish assortment of drunks, sneak thieves, sluts and psychopaths' – but that can't be helped. A good job that they are confined to the kitchen, since their mere physical appearance would panic the punters. The cooks' changing-room, Bourdain confesses, is a museum of dermatological dreadfulness: boils, rashes, pimples and assorted festering sores. Like Foreign Legionnaires, they tend to be running away from something in their lives – wives, ex-wives, El Salvador, previous convictions for assault with a bad mussel. On Bourdain's evidence, off-duty line cooks rarely discourse about the relative flavour profiles of the white and black truffle: 'all conversation *must*, out of historical necessity, concern involuntary rectal penetration, penis size, physical flaws or annoying mannerisms or defects.'

The hours are brutal. One of his bosses cheerfully told Bourdain the secret of his successful marriage: 'I work all the time. I never see her . . . She never sees me. We are very happy.' (The wife subsequently communicated her happiness by jumping out of the window of her high-rise apartment building.) The kitchen, like the asylum, is one of society's 'total institutions', a whole life for those who haven't got a life. 'In my kitchen,' Bourdain says, 'I know how to behave (as opposed to in real life, where I'm on shakier ground).' Creativity in line cooks is greatly overrated. What you want is robotic consistency. The guests expect it; the chef demands it. There are the very occasional artists, high-end specialists, like *pâtissiers* ('the neurologists of cooking') and *sauciers*, permitted their integrity and 'delusions of grandeur', but in the main, they're a dysfunctional and mercenary lot. Proficiency without passion; expertise without vision.

If you are used to the spaciousness of life on a U-boat, restaurant kitchens can make you claustrophobic. Movement has to be predictable and local spatial and temporal disciplines have to be rigorously respected. The apparent mess has an aesthetic as well as a

pragmatic logic. *Mise en place*, the cook's meticulously arranged supply of standard ingredients, is 'the religion of all good line cooks. Do *not* fuck with a line cook's "meez".' Nor with his knives, or his pans, or his carefully hoarded hillock of side-towels, or the fundament of his man-servants. The sauté station, the grill station and *garde-manger* have to march to the same beat: getting the medium-rare rack of lamb to come up at the same time as the sole sur le plat takes co-ordinated discipline, and individual flair is merely an irritant. (It was, in any case, the surplus of perspiration over inspiration that gave us sour-dough.) The chapter chronicling the daily rhythm of work in Bourdain's brasserie is a taut account of the testosterone-charged backstage ballet that is line cooking. If, on reading it, you find that you probably couldn't take the pressure, you might try a more easy-going occupation – like air-traffic control.

If originality is overrated, obedience is not. The voice of the chef is the voice of God. In Bourdain's world, the chef demands absolute loyalty, and, if he's prudent, he gives it in return. The kitchen, like the army whose moral texture it so closely resembles, is a place of charismatic authority. The only relevant rule book is how the chef does things. His line cooks learn his system and his choreography, and, in return, he looks out for them, moving them up and out with him as he advances through the Manhattan restaurant jungle. They constitute Burke's 'little platoons' in kitchen life: they need each other, they owe each other, and genuine affections can develop among them. There are vultures everywhere, poised to steal the chef's supplies, ruin his reputation and alienate the affections of his sous-chef. The chef needs eyes in the back of his head, and his loyal lieutenants supply them. It's a man's man's world – flashing knives, searing heat, sweating bodies in close contact – and women line cooks, again on Bourdain's evidence, make it only on the condition that they're more macho than the men. So he pays touching tribute to Beth 'the Grill Bitch': 'One sorry Moroccan cook pinched her ass [and] found himself suddenly bent over a cutting board with Beth dry-humping him from behind, saying: "How do *you* like it, bitch?"' (I trust Alice Waters orders these matters differently at Chez Panisse.)

Bourdain records four epiphanies – all suitably profane – that confirmed his vocation. The first came when he was 11 years old, on vacation in France to visit his French father's family. There was a vichyssoise on the *Queen Mary*. It was cold and it was good, and he remembered it. On arrival, his normal American patterns asserted themselves, and he reverted to steak haché, frites and 'Coca'. The second epiphany came weeks later in Vienne, when his parents left him sitting in the car while they ate at La Pyramide. The young Bourdain then realised that food could be something important, perhaps even a forbidden pleasure and a consuming passion. In a spirit of pure spite, he set about to eat absolutely everything going in France: the smellier, the slimier and the more un-American, the better – Vacherin, tripe, kidneys, brains, boudin noir. This prepared the way for the third epiphany, which was his first oyster. That 'glistening, vaguely sexual-looking object' gave pleasure to rank with any other later profane 'first': 'I remember it like I remember losing my virginity – and, in many ways, more fondly.' Years later, cooking at the humble Cape Cod seafood restaurant, the fourth epiphany came when Bourdain saw the chef 'rear-ending' a bride (partly) in her wedding-dress among the dustbins. That settled things. Chefs were irresistible to women. 'I knew then . . . for the first time: I wanted to be a chef.'

The cynicism about life backstage carries the book along and supplies its advertising copy ('shocking', 'Bourdain tells all'), but it's a very uneven cynicism and, in the end, Bourdain is neither able nor willing to sustain it. The noir-ish sensibility and the gonzo-journalistic style come easily to a hard-bitten Big Apple chef who is also the author of well-received kitchen *policiers*, but they break down together when Bourdain confesses (and, in context, it counts as a genuine confession) that he loves the chef's life and that he loves food. It *is* a 'calling', even at the faux-modest levels represented by Bourdain's brasserie – I'd count myself very fortunate to be a regular there – and there's no missing the element of masculine celebration (surgeons' humour) in his exposés of backstage realities. But it's only towards the end of the book that Bourdain qualifies the picture of restaurant life that he elsewhere offers as definitive: not all chefs are like him; not all restaurant kitchens are like his; and maybe he and his motley

crew aren't quite as Bad as he boasts they are.

Trained, though incompletely, in the French culinary tradition, Bourdain spent a brief period cooking in one of Pino Luongo's seriously up-scale Manhattan Tuscan restaurants. (Think River Café.) The kitchen politics were as vicious as ever, but the integrity with which ingredients were selected and the simplicity with which they were prepared was a 'revelation': a simple pasta pomodoro; simple grilled calamari; a simple sautéed calves' liver. The owner adored food, and made sure that all his chefs did too. Writing about his own favourite Manhattan restaurant – Scott Bryan's Veritas, where he happily *pays* to eat – Bourdain describes a kitchen which is an island of 'reason and calm, where the pace is steady, where quality always takes precedence over the demands of volume, and where it's not always about dick dick dick'. This was 'food for *cooks*': 'simple, straightforward and absolutely pretence-free', yet chosen with ruthless standards, prepared with honesty, and served with respect for those consuming it. Cooking like that, Bourdain says, is 'making magic'. The less the art, the more the magic.

There is a great tradition of saying that. We tend these days to associate it with the Italians, though the Japanese – to whose kitchen-integrity Bourdain also pays tribute – would do as well. The French can say it too, and with great conviction. It was, after all, Escoffier who instructed his disciples, 'Faites simple,' and Elizabeth David who memorialised La Mère Poulard's response to a Parisian restaurateur's request for the secret of her famous omelettes at the Auberge de Saint-Michel Tête d'Or: 'Voici la recette de l'omelette: je casse de bons œufs dans une terrine, je les bats bien, je mets un bon morceau de beurre dans la poêle, j'y jette les œufs, et je remue constamment. Je suis heureuse, monsieur, si cette recette vous fait plaisir.' There's absolutely nothing to it; it's pure magic; and you probably can't do it yourself.

As Goffman understood all along, what we think about kitchens, and especially about restaurant kitchens, is a pretty good index of the way we think about social life and its domains. And what we think about kitchens these days seems incoherent and confused. Everywhere in our culture, the kitchen has moved frontstage. Film crews prowl the

kitchens of starred restaurants; television sells the illusion of celebrity chefs in their domestic kitchens; reportage from *vaut-le-voyage* kitchens sells in the bookstores like the restaurant 'special'. Some of us buy the stuff to learn how to do it; many more as culinary pornography – to know exactly what it is we can't do. *Babette's Feast*, *Big Night* and *Like Water for Chocolate* celebrate the heroism and passion of the kitchen; *Tampopo* and Lenny Henry's *Chef!* its obsessiveness and discipline; *Fawlty Towers* its pretentious chaos. Californian restaurants specialise in the open kitchen, satisfying the modern demand for inside information and for authenticity-all-the-way-down: its calm, cleanliness and competence give assurance that all will be well on our plates, and if there's a row in the kitchen, we're out of there. But the kitchen is now just part of the show, and when preparation becomes performance, backstage recedes to a state of mind, even more inaccessible, and harder to sustain, though no less necessary to maintaining the essential illusions of social life. We want to know it all, and we still want the magic. Perhaps the man who received La Mère Poulard's omelette recipe in 1922 *was* satisfied, but modern taste suspects that the old lady was hiding something.

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