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Anthony Bourdain inside the refrigerator at Brasserie Les Halles in New York, 2000.

ADVENTURES IN FOOD

A Tale of Two Names

The editor of *Kitchen Confidential* attempts to reconcile Tony Bourdain, the socially awkward man she counted as a close friend, and Anthony Bourdain, the cool-cat global traveler the world came to love

BY KAREN RINALDI

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The paradox of Tony Bourdain has occupied my memory of him all these years A.B. (After Bourdain). My son, Gio, born on Bourdain's 44th birthday—June 25, 2000, two weeks after *Kitchen Confidential* hit the *New York Times* best-seller list—captured this paradox hilariously one evening. "Wait, what?," Gio, then a young teen, asked. "Tony Bourdain and Anthony Bourdain aren't brothers? They're the same person?"

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Up to that point, Gio hadn't considered that the Tony who had come to our family holidays, or stayed at our house on the Jersey Shore, could also be the TV personality Anthony Bourdain. The moment of revelation came when we were all out in some Jersey dive and people were buzzing around us. (Perhaps inconsequentially, though somehow fused in my memory, Gio also thought for years that tofu, not a foodstuff in our household, was "toe food" and couldn't fathom why anyone would want to eat it. I'm sure the Brothers Bourdain would have agreed with Gio on that.)

Going in Blind

A few weeks after I published *Kitchen Confidential,* I was put on bed rest from having gone into preterm labor with Gio during a long-awaited meeting, incongruously, with Mikhail Baryshnikov. It had been an intense few weeks. I was working from the couch in my small West Village apartment when the book hit the best-seller list, and I received a call from my friend and publishing colleague Dan Halpern, asking, "How the hell did you do that?" I told Dan that, like so much in my life at that moment, it was a miracle.

Dominic Sessa and Antonio Banderas in *Tony.*

About a year and a half earlier, I was nursing my infant daughter, Rocco, at five in the morning, when I read an e-mail from Tony, who was in Tokyo for the opening of the Japanese outpost of the Brasserie Les Halles, the now shuttered French bistro where he worked as executive chef. I'd known Tony for a few years—he was friends with my then-partner and was represented by my dear friend Kim Witherspoon—and I was well aware of his frustration as a fiction author. He'd already published two novels, *Bone in the Throat* and *Gone Bamboo.* These darkly humorous crime novels won little traction in the mercurial world of book publishing. Tony had been working grueling hours in the kitchen eking out pages that he hoped would put his life as a writer ahead of his life as a chef. It wasn't working.

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The e-mail, telling of Tony's antics in Tokyo, was revelatory and serendipitous, and made clear from his casual recounting of his adventures in Japan that he had a gift for storytelling. I was running Bloomsbury Publishing's relatively new American division at the time, and I was looking to discover writers for our burgeoning list. I called Kim and offered a modest but solid advance for a nonfiction book by Tony—a blind offer with the subject to be determined.

When he received the fax with the offer, Tony thought it was a joke. His influential article "Don't Eat Before Reading This" was about to be published in *The New Yorker,* and while I hadn't yet read that piece, I felt confident enough to offer him an advance with no proposal or pitch. The e-mail from Tokyo was that good. I figured when Tony got back to the U.S., we would discuss what the book could be. While it wasn't necessarily a safe bet, I'd made plenty of others that didn't pan out—rarely do published books meet the starry-eyed expectations both author and publisher have for them.

Tony and I met for a drink as soon as he returned to New York. His first words to me as we sat down were "I already have a title for the book," sounding both self-satisfied and more than a little nervous about how it would land: "*Kitchen Confidential.*"

The Bourdain Paradox

Some of these stories about Tony have been told in the myriad books and articles about and by Tony himself. My particular take on Tony is borne out of the way he funnels through my heart, mind, and experience of him as a person not easily pegged and containing contradictions galore. He embodied the kind of mystery that only paradox can explain. This, of course, got even more complicated with fame. Tony's paradoxical nature was part of what made him so beloved to so many—but his contradictions weren't entirely on the public radar until after his tragic death, in 2018.

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The sweet confusion on the part of young Gio betrays how I'd always felt: There was Anthony, the cool-cat world traveler whose repartee about food, culture, and politics flowed brilliantly and smoothly and extemporaneously from his thoughts to his inimitable narration and into our adoring reception. And there was Tony, who was shy, a bit socially awkward, and like all of us, someone who just wanted to be loved. Profane with an underlying tenderness, aloof and authentic, performative and shy, loyal almost to the fault of self-harm, and harsh to those who pissed him off, Tony felt a little dangerous but also like a warm hug.

Badass Anthony moved with an ease in the world, seemingly insouciant, and always at the ready for a quick, spot-on, and often sidesplitting observation. But it was the more vulnerable, receptive, and contemplative Tony that made Bourdain so attuned to what was happening around him, providing the fertile ground that nurtured his ability to synthesize it all into something meaningful for his readers, viewers, and devotees.

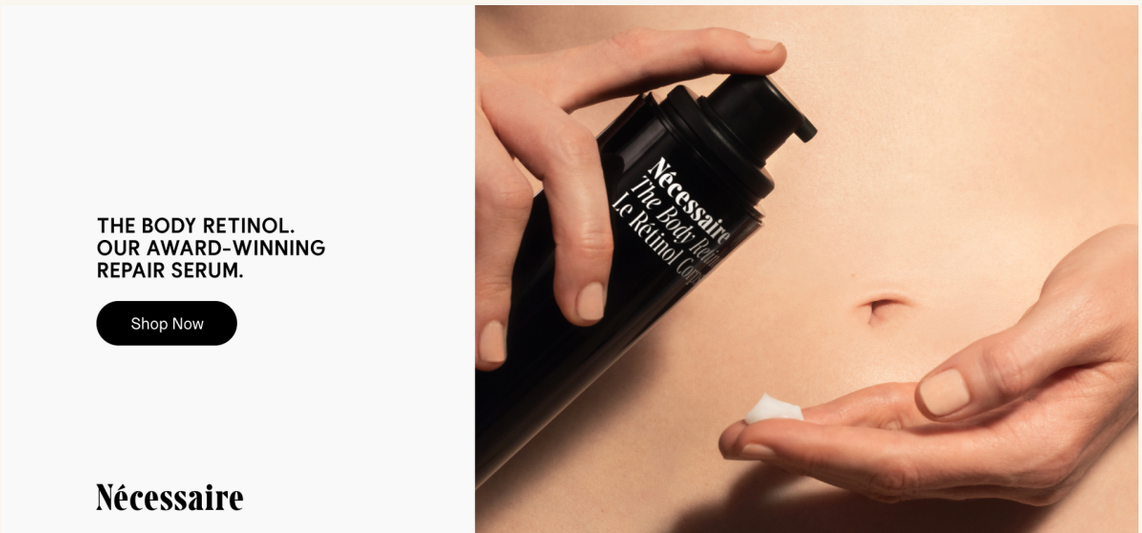
Everyone thought Anthony Bourdain was cool, which Tony found absurd because he would readily and sincerely admit to not being cool at all. All his protestations to the contrary did little to dissuade fans that he was anything but. I'd interviewed him once for a book I was writing, *It's Great to Suck at Something.* The subject of one chapter, *cool ain't shit,* had Tony all over it. When I asked him what he thought about everyone thinking he was cool, he asserted, "I am not cool. I have never been cool. Though I might, for a while, have done my best to appear cool. I choose to feel, to love, to hurt, to fail. Wouldn't have it any other way." He elaborated, "I finally met and became friendly with my platonic ideal of cool: Iggy Pop. But Iggy needs love. We talk of that a lot. And those of us who *need* love, to be loved, appreciated … can never be really cool. Cool needs nothing. Cool doesn't give a fuck. And I give a fuck."

While Tony's fame as a writer was something he coveted, it's worth noting that TV was never his goal. He'd told me early on after the success of *Kitchen Confidential,* "Promise you'll shoot me if I ever do TV." I thought that would be a long shot after watching his first TV appearance on Oprah soon after becoming a best-selling author. He looked profoundly uncomfortable on the set. It was not promising. I remember cringing and thinking to myself, "Oh boy, Tony is not made for TV." I didn't think for a second that it was in his future. I was wrong.

The offer to travel the world in search of the perfect meal turned out to be too tempting for Tony to turn down. Thus Anthony Bourdain's TV career was spawned with *A Cook's Tour* and his second book of the same name. Amplified by the ubiquity of TV, Tony became a citizen of the world through his masterful charisma, his inimitable banter, and his willingness to eat *anything*. (The live Cobra Heart episode is a no-turning-back moment.) That he became so damn good at TV arguably caused some cognitive dissonance. Tony henceforth became known throughout the world as Anthony.

Bourdain in Hanoi for a scene in *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, as featured in the 2021 documentary *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain*.

He admitted to being more comfortable on the upslope—struggling to improve rather than cruising with success. During that same interview about coolness, he told me, "I suck at Brazilian jujitsu. Which is why it is a great joy to me. To be at the bottom of an endless learning slope …with no peak. That's deeply satisfying. It's like being the worst, newest cook in the kitchen again. The satisfactions of learning in tiny increments, the daily problem solving, the sucking less … it's great. Excelling is overrated as far as satisfaction goes. I'm pretty confident in my ability to make successful, much-loved, commercially successful pure food porn. I could do technically excellent shows on BBQ 12 months a year and make a mint. Nothing could interest me less. It would be a living hell. I've become comfortable with public speaking. I know how to make audiences laugh. I'm sure this is why comedians kill themselves with such regularity. Because they get good at it."



It would be wrong to lean too much into this last statement, but I would hazard a guess that Tony was battling with Anthony in ways we might never grasp, leaving us all to just sit with our broken hearts. We learn, if anything, that often the only way to find acceptance is to surrender to what is. We are unlikely to get answers to our need for understanding his end.

Mano a Mano

When I was about to publish the 2007 memoir *Devil in the Kitchen* by the chef Marco Pierre White, Tony's hero, Tony made a $100 bet with me against the odds of Marco getting on a plane to travel to the U.S. to promote the book. Marco is the original bad-boy chef who also won three Michelin stars—the first British chef, and the youngest ever, to do so. (He gave them back in 1999.) I forget why Bourdain was so certain Marco wouldn't travel. Maybe it was a hedge against his fear of disappointment had we not gotten the opportunity to celebrate one of the geniuses of the kitchen. I made the bet, convinced I could wrangle White to America.

Chef Marco Pierre White at Harvey's, in London, 1987.

Marco told me the night we met at an alcohol-infused dinner in London that he held in support of David Cameron's rise to prime minister, "I'll do anything you ask. Even give you the shirt off my back." I said, "O.K., I'll take it."

It was a test. I figured if he gave me the shirt off his back, a promotional trip to New York would be an easy ask. At the end of the dinner, Marco unceremoniously disrobed and handed me his sweat-soaked, and yet still incomprehensibly crisp, white collarless shirt, and put his jacket back on, naked underneath for the rest of the raucous evening. I found Marco to be more gentle and lovely than his reputation would allow. This seemed to be a trend among chefs.

Marco easily agreed to come to New York. Ever a man of his word, Tony paid up with a cool $100 bill, across which he scrawled, "I was Wrong!"

It seems most of us can't predict a damn thing. And maybe it's this very unpredictability that makes things memorable. The evening celebrating Marco's memoir became a boisterous affair: a night of gluttonous eating, chain-smoking between courses, all of it fueled with copious amounts of alcohol. It started at Lupa Osteria Romana and landed in the upstairs room at the Spotted Pig—all of this in the *before*-times.

While those places would ultimately fall from grace because of the less-than-acceptable behaviors they became known for—among them harassment in all its forms—what stuck with me all these years later is not the gluttony of that particular evening. Maybe it's not the kind of gossip anyone wants to hear, but what resonates for me is the mutual, tender respect Marco and Tony showed one another. There was no macho posturing. No one-upmanship. They were truly two gentlemen sharing an evening despite the goings-on around them.

The Name Game

So, what's in a name? Tony. Anthony. In *Tony,* the A24 Bourdain biopic premiering next week, directed by Matthew Johnson and starring *The Holdovers*'s Dominic Sessa, there's a back-and-forth about the Tony/Anthony dichotomy. The film suggests that the Tony moniker signifies the early days of Bourdain's callow youth, and when he finally gets serious about cooking, he presents himself as Anthony—the name only his mother called him until then. I'd started working on this essay weeks before I saw the film, and was surprised to see the importance of the name-play part of Bourdain's story, even if it signified something somewhat different from Gio's muddle about the Brothers Bourdain.

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The call upon any of us to interpret a life is convoluted—especially if said life is played out on the public stage. While *Tony* is a sweet, myth-building attempt to deconstruct what made Bourdain *Bourdain,* I can't help but feel that these stories contribute to the way fame pushes the famous into boxes so that the idolizing public can feel connected to someone they want to know. I believe this is ultimately about the drive for union with our heroes—or, conversely, about our need to bring them down to earth with easy exegeses. Either way, it reduces the complexity, the depth of someone's being, whether famous or not.

Banderas, Sessa, and Leo Woodall in *Tony.*

A life, a name, contains multitudes. Contradiction, if lived honestly; an inevitability because we humans are a confused and messy lot. Connection, because we are only who we are in relation to one another. Creation, because a poet lives inside each of us. And, ultimately, love. Bourdain embodied all of these things. At the end of it all, as Tony said, he "chose to feel love."

This web of creation, connection, and contradiction makes up the best of who and what we are, and the energy I feel whenever I think about Tony. I wish he were alive today to help us parse the divisions that threaten our every institution. He'd have something profound to say, something beyond the reach of my speculation. But as someone who embodied the contradictions of the Brothers Bourdain—Tony and Anthony, however you might wrap your head around them—he would have mined his internal contradictions to lend some light to our own. Personally, communally, globally. Bourdain was a citizen of the world in all his glorious and messy contradictions. Lucky for us, we get to share the time-space continuum with him.

Tony *will be released in select U.S. theaters on August 7, followed by a nationwide expansion on August 21*

Anthony Bourdain's three crime novels, Bone in the Throat, Gone Bamboo, *and* The Bobby Gold Stories, *are now available in a new paperback edition*

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