Overt Masculinity in Anthony Bourdain’s *A Cook’s Tour*

In his book *A Cook’s Tour: Global Adventures in Extreme Cuisines*, Anthony Bourdain travels around the world searching for perfect meals and plenty of adventure. He does so with great enthusiasm for the food and travel, but also occasionally describes his meals with crass language, cursing and sexual innuendo. Bourdain’s propensity to do this comes from years of society dictating that men do not belong in the kitchen, but primarily with domestic responsibilities. Bourdain’s status as a successful professional chef places him in a more masculine role than that of men cooking for their families. However, in *A Cook’s Tour*, Bourdain does not show off his own professional skills, meaning he must display his manliness through professional cooking vocabulary and stereotypically masculine behaviors.

Though Bourdain, in this work, is experiencing other people’s cuisines and not doing the cooking himself, the insecurity of being a man in what is traditionally a woman’s domain makes the author feel the need to express himself in an overtly masculine way through his writing, to ensure that his audience knows that he is a real, tough man and cooking has not made him effeminate. His discomfort may also arise because in his travels he is unable to show his professional skill, instead watching other people. While he does occasionally soften his language and reflect on the sad horrors that occurred in the country he is visiting, Bourdain keeps his macho attitude towards food and the world throughout his work.

Anthony Bourdain is not the first man to need to prove his masculinity because of his career, despite the acceptance and celebration of professional male chefs. The idea that the kitchen is within the woman’s realm has existed for centuries, and is still very much ingrained in American culture. In her book *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*, Sherrie Inness writes; “It is difficult to escape noticing that cooking in the United States is very much
considered to be mom’s responsibility, not dad’s. Food and its preparation are strongly gender-coded as feminine” (Inness 1). According to author David Kamp and Charles Williams, founder of the kitchenware store Williams-Sonoma, “It just wasn’t socially acceptable for an American-born man to aspire to a career in the kitchen. ‘I would say that any child who told his family that he wanted to be a cook in a restaurant would be sent to his room and told to stay there until he came to his senses’” (Kamp, 9-10). Because of the great pressure society puts on male cooks, they feel the need to constantly prove their capability as men in order to avoid being seen as weak or feminine. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bourdain chooses to express himself in ways that show he does not back down from blood or gore, thereby validating himself as a man.

American culinary culture of the early and mid twentieth century greatly shaped the continued ideal that a man should and does have different culinary tastes than women. Inness claims, “[T]exts carefully spelled out which foods were appropriate for women and which were appropriate for men. Thus, men’s cooking literature played a role in separating male and female food tastes” (23). These works reflect society’s view that it is less acceptable for a man to like the same foods that women do. When writing his book in the early twenty-first century, Bourdain commented, “…there is that other place, where they serve the seawater foam and the desserts look like Fabergé eggs, but I wasn’t going there…. though I’m happy to sneer at it in principle” (Bourdain 76). Even in American society today there is an expectation that men and women like different foods, and it is seen as unmanly for men to enjoy delicate meals that appear light and intricately assembled. They are instead expected to enjoy more stereotypically masculine foods, which Sherrie Inness suggests include fare “such as barbecue or grilled steak. In addition, …men are supposed to prepare the game or seafood that they hunt, taking a dim interest in making lighter, more ‘feminine’ foods” (Inness 2-3).
According to Sherrie Inness, there is a “male cooking mystique,” some rules for men to follow in the culinary world. Because women insist on feeding men some fluffy frippery...instead of steak and potatoes, his heart’s true desire,… If men choose to cook, they must make sure that their masculinity is not diminished…It is perfectly acceptable and even desirable for men to cook some foods that are associated with masculinity and manliness – most importantly, meat. (Inness 18-19)

It is not embarrassing for a man to know how to prepare masculine dishes involving traditionally manly ingredients like meat and potatoes. Men can even be proud of the ability, knowing they can save themselves from a “marshmallow-and-maraschino Jell-O salad” with a real meal that will satisfy them (Inness 19).

Jessamyn Neuhaus argues a similar approach, citing Eleanor Howe’s book from 1939, *Feeding Father*, in which she explains that the average man simply wants a straight-forward, well-cooked meal without too much fuss (Neuhaus 77). Leone B. Moats, author of a book on etiquette, also appealed to women regarding their cooking, arguing “that men despised fussy foods: ‘You can’t appease a man’s appetite with a fruit salad or a bit of fluff…and yet women continue to overlook this fact and go right on serving dishes that have no relation to muscle and brawn’” (Ibid). Clearly men saw food as directly reflecting how masculine they appeared, and they could not appear or become more manly when their wives served marshmallow or Jell-O concoctions made with a lot of frills, instead of what they seem to have preferred – a simple meal of meat and starch.

Despite their dissatisfaction with women’s fluffy cooking, and the appeal of a man who is able to cook some foods, Inness argues that the mindset “that women ‘naturally’ belong in the
kitchen and men ‘naturally’ do not” is still intact (3). Women producing food that men do not always like does not make those men want to become every-meal cooks themselves, as it would undermine their masculinity. The expectations of women and men regarding cooking “[helps] to ensure the subordination of women” and assert the strength and dominance of men (Inness 1).

Inness argues, “…our society makes it clear that a man’s place is not in the kitchen unless he is a chef” (Inness 3). Yet Anthony Bourdain shows through his writing that being a chef does not necessarily make him more comfortable in his role. Bourdain writes of his love of cooking and food, and seems proud of his accomplishments, but he still gives incredibly graphic descriptions of gory subjects. While in Portugal, Bourdain witnessed a pig being butchered for a feast. He writes about “The mustachioed man I took to be the chief assassin” preparing to kill the animal, and the great effort exerted by four men to wrestle it onto its deathbed. He describes the sound emitted by the pig as “[penetrating] the fillings in my teeth,” and “the shrieking, squealing, struggling animal [heaving] himself off the cart, forcefully kicking one of his tormentors in the groin repeatedly, [and] spraying gouts of blood” (Bourdain 21-22). In this account and throughout his book, the author gives an overtly masculine view of events, which women would likely not write. Because he is a cook in a society which clearly deems that a feminine endeavor, and visits cultures which also seem to expect machismo from a man, Bourdain must make use of graphic, violent illustrations of events as well as the opportunity to laugh at – and sympathize with – a man repeatedly being kicked in the groin by a massive pig. This is a humor most often, it seems, appreciated by adolescent boys, and Bourdain shows his maleness by reporting it in detail.

Bourdain’s masculinity also comes through in his apprehension toward certain activities in his travels. While in San Sebastián, Spain, the author was invited to go out with some cooks
but “the ‘all-male’ thing” worried him about the food because it is “an expression which, in my experience, is most often accompanied by signs reading PEER-O-RAMA and BUDDY BOOTHS” (Bourdain 66). He is wary of the night in Spain because of his own guys’ night out experiences while at home, in which

A night out ‘with the guys’… usually veers into the territory of bar fights, Jäger shots, public urination, and vomiting into inappropriate vessels. …[T]oo many guys in one room will almost always…lead the conversation to…cars, pussy, and whose dick is bigger. (Bourdain 66)

Bourdain writes of his past experiences with a bit of disgust, but delves so deeply into it that pride comes through as well. Though many would be embarrassed by their drunken behavior, the author uses his to show how manly he really is. He also shows that members of his kitchen staff feel the same fears about emasculation that he does because of his career choice. Their repetition of the sexual, stereotypically masculine topics Bourdain lists shows that they feel the need to assert their manliness because of the gendered environment in which they work.

Sherrie Inness writes, “Cooking literature suggested that men’s masculinity was not diminished by cooking when food was sexualized because males were still portrayed in a stereotypical aggressive, masculine relationship to the food they prepared” (Inness 23). Anthony Bourdain gladly uses the tactic of sexualization, both with his description of his night out with the guys, another night out with the girls, and, throughout his work, about food. According to him, “…women have nothing to learn from men in the bad behavior department. …They talked about stuff that made even me blush” (Bourdain 71). Bourdain revels in how liberal the women are about their sexuality, and seems to be surprised that they can be so ‘unneurotic about sex,” as if this is something only men can achieve (Bourdain 73). His experience with the women he goes
out with in Spain paints a very different picture than the old cookbooks in which women are assumed to not be able to cook hearty meals for their men.

Bourdain also takes pleasure in the woman chef, acting as a woman, in the cooking world, despite his happiness in dining with these women and observing some of their stereotypically male qualities. He writes, “There is nothing sexier to many male chefs than a good-looking, brilliantly talented young woman in chef whites, with grill marks and grease burns on her hands and wrists” (Bourdain 77). By using this description, Bourdain takes the traditional masculine role of being the observer in the kitchen, watching a woman cook him a meal. He asserts his manliness further by commenting on the chef’s looks and her sexiness, making this talented chef into someone he appreciates not only for her skill, but also for her sex appeal. For a young woman to be in a space Bourdain considers largely masculine, the author sees that this chef can handle herself and possibly feels more attraction to her because of it.

Though he appreciates the food in each culture and the cooking skills of many women, Bourdain also depicts many of the women as sex symbols. He makes similar comments about the women he sees while in Russia, and while he seems to enjoy the cuisine and nightlife with his hosts, he states other reasons for wanting to stay. Bourdain writes,

   I’d never seen so many tall, beautiful, well-dressed women in one place in my life. That they seem about as soft and cuddly as a fistful of quarters is beside the point – they’re gorgeous. At a blintz place, …more creamy-white-breasted girls…efficiently prepared and served

the food (Bourdain 94). And while he raves about the food in both Vietnam and Morocco, Bourdain also feels compelled to comment on the beauty of women in Vietnam and cooking culture of Morocco. In the latter country, Bourdain notes, “It’s a man’s, man’s world. The
women cook” (Bourdain 104). His insecurity as a male cook requires him to see women as objects to be viewed, so his masculinity shines through brighter than his love of different cuisines. American society allows men to enjoy food, but not necessarily to let it get in the way of appreciating women’s beauty – something real men do.

Bourdain seeks validation of his manliness throughout his book, whether or not there are women to impress or food to prepare. While in Russia at a sauna, when facing the reality of having to go into a freezing lake, he writes “I don’t want to look like a wuss, even when medical imperative and good sense dictate otherwise, so I gritted my teeth and endured without complaint” (Bourdain 85). Though he is not trying to show off for a woman, or in a stereotypically masculine environment, Bourdain continues to insist on out-manning the people he is with. Even in a non-cooking environment, he chooses to suffer through doing something he clearly does not wish to, just to avoid appearing weak. He also comments on first putting on a swimsuit instead of staying naked, because while he would take some pleasure in the idea of showing his genitals on TV, “I preferred that they not be pignoli-sized when I did” (Ibid).

In his travels around the world, Anthony Bourdain comments on sexualized food on several occasions. In Vietnam, he tastes a soft-boiled duck embryo, to which a Vietnamese passer-by says, “‘Make you strong!’ While he doesn’t make any rude accompanying gestures, I gather that hot vin lon is supposed to ensure an imminent erection and many, many sons” (Bourdain 63). Bourdain has a similar experience later, while in a different part of Vietnam, which makes him “[begin] to think that there must be a lot of penile dysfunction in Asia. …Just about every damn thing you can think of seems to have been thoroughly investigated for its potential wood-raising properties” (Bourdain 131). Even when not obviously seeking it out, food
appears to Anthony Bourdain in a sexualized way because of the gendered nature of cooking professionally in America.

Bourdain continues his sexualization of food around the world, and is clearly happy to take advantage of a situation when he stumbles across it. However, he also creates some and delights in “sexy-looking anchovies” while in Spain and mischievously writes that a sheep testicle in Morocco “was certainly the best testicle I’d ever had in my mouth” (Bourdain 74, 126). By joking about a homosexual act, Bourdain asserts his heterosexuality and masculinity. He shows that he is comfortable with how the world sees him, and that they do view him as a straight male, and is therefore able to make a quip because his audience would not believe he had ever had testicles other than the sheep’s. The author has fun with his writing in a way that displays his need to be seen as manly, and making sexual jokes about food helps him achieve that goal.

Though the sexualization of food is an important way for male cooks to assert their masculinity despite their profession or hobby, it is certainly not the only method of getting that sentiment across to their audience and the world. In A Cook’s Tour, Bourdain uses adventure, gore, and stuffing himself with food on many occasions to prove how manly he really is. He begins his travels listing mystery writers and reading their works like The Quiet American, clearly yearning for the kind of adventure found within their pages (Bourdain 56).

Bourdain finds adventure in nearly every place he visits, and is thus able to carry out another method of asserting his masculinity. In Russia, he writes of a perfect meal, which includes “Good food, good company, exotic ambience, and an element of adventure” (Bourdain 86). While many do not think of adventure when they contemplate a perfect meal, it shows the author’s pull towards showing himself in a masculine light. Boys are often depicted as fearless
and curious in their childhoods, and Bourdain seeks to stretch his daring spirit into adulthood, both in the types of foods he tries and in the activities he is willing to participate in (such as jumping into the icy lake in Russia). By constantly being adventurous, Bourdain also consistently shows off his boyish nature in more adult activities – like tasting a snake heart in Vietnam and sheep testicles in Morocco – but also his bravery in facing foods and situations that many would happily shy away from.

While most of his fearlessness comes through in the food he eats, Bourdain has a clear sense of physical and mental adventure as well. He not only likes to try odd delicacies from different cultures, but also dreams of living out his own mystery or nomad story. While in Morocco, Bourdain explains, “This was exactly the sort of scenario I’d envisioned… This is what I was here for! To ride across desert sand with blue-clad Berbers, to sleep under the stars, surrounded by nothing, to eat…in the middle of nowhere” (Bourdain 122). His boyish sense of adventure was finally fulfilled, if just briefly, as he lived out an Arabian Nights like scenario. He thus asserts his position as a real man by being glad of this situation, rather than sitting in a restaurant and eating in a standard manner.

Bourdain also takes bold, occasionally dangerous, risks in the food he eats. While in Japan he insisted on tasting the potentially deadly puffer fish sushi – fugu. He writes, “I wanted the exhilaration of a near-death experience” (Bourdain 153). He even planned his trip to Tokyo specifically around the fugu season, to be certain he would be able to eat a fish that might kill him. Bourdain seeks to validate his masculinity by not only trying exotic foods, but also dangerous ones. Adding danger to his other qualities show how much the author needs his audience to see him as a man’s man and not someone who consumes frilly foods.
The author pronounces his masculinity also through the amount of food he eats. It is traditionally the man’s role to eat more food than a woman, and to do so with gusto. While in Vietnam, Bourdain fulfills this position with “…a fierce compulsion to eat everything in sight,” including tiny fried birds which he “[wolfs]…down, gnawing it right up to its feet, beak, brain, tiny crunchy bones and all. Delicious” (Bourdain 58). His daring side shines through in the types of foods he eats, and combined with the amount of food he seems to consume, he plays the part of a robust male well.

In Morocco, too, the chef again seeks to engorge himself with food, and combines that desire with gory descriptions of butchering his dinner. When attempting to provide a meal for his guides, Bourdain demands, “I need a whole fucking lamb. Legs, body, neck, and balls” (Bourdain 119). Bourdain combines a large quantity of food, an explicit request for a male animal – suggesting perhaps that the male is better than the female – crass language, and the realization for his reader that a bloody death is soon to come. The graphic killing of the sheep does indeed arrive quickly, and Bourdain describes the death in detail: “The animal fell on its side, blood gurgling into the alley. …I could readily see the animal’s open windpipe; the head appeared to have been damn near cut off. But it continued…to twitch” (Bourdain 120). This vivid description shows that the author is a tough man who can handle seeing a lot of blood and a twitching animal without issue. He has no use for maraschino cherries in his dinner, as he is clearly strong enough to ‘hunt’ his own meal – by selecting and ordering the death of a sheep – and merit a sturdy meal of meat, especially that which was just killed before his eyes.

Bourdain proves his masculinity not just through seeing a sheep shed blood, but also some people. While in Russia, he watches two men in an organized fight, during which
…blood spread across [one fighter’s] face, running off his chin onto his chest. His opponent, a ripplingly muscled young fellow…didn’t hesitate – he drove his knee twice into the fallen man’s liver and began pounding mercilessly at the side of his skull with his fists. (Bourdain 81)

Bourdain sat “close enough to the ring to catch the blood spray,” further emphasizing his tough stomach and machismo (Ibid). Bourdain first seems taken aback, even disgusted, by the brutality and the audience’s festive air, but then writes, “It was nauseating. It was ugly. It was kinda cool” (Bourdain 83). Through his evident awe of and appreciation for the brutal fight in front of him, Bourdain proves himself as a man who does not become squeamish at the sight of blood, even when it comes from humans.

While visiting Japan, the author appeals to a male audience in a more palatable manner. Rather than detailing the death of an animal or pummeling of a fighter, Bourdain compares an occurrence in the cooking world with one in the realm of sports. He writes, the “Bobby Flay ‘cutting board incident’…[was] seen by many Japanese…as the culinary equivalent of the Tyson/Holyfield ear-chewing debacle” (Bourdain 143). While he does include a gruesome image, Bourdain’s comparison demonstrates his masculinity and that of male chefs by portraying a culinary event to the Japanese as on the same level as a sporting event is to Americans – and underlines his own manliness by showing his knowledge of sports. Though a male cooking in the United States can be seen as effeminate, Bourdain here shows that, in other parts of the world, it is akin to a manly fight with a shocking outcome.

Despite his dependence on gruesome, sexual, and adventurous descriptions and search for dangerous foods to substantiate his position as a truly masculine man in a feminine setting, Bourdain also shows a sensitive side in his culinary travels. While in Vietnam for the first time in
his book, the author reflects on the awful effects French and American military presence had on
the Vietnamese culture and people. He sees people walking down the street, completely covered
petty, useless, lighter-than-air television fucking show?” (Bourdain 63). Bourdain recognizes
when to care about other people and put the trivial comments to the side, but he still maintains
his assertion of masculinity by sprinkling his phrases with curse words.

At the end of that day in Vietnam, Bourdain writes that he “[stared] at the ceiling in
tears” over the destruction of humanity he saw in the streets (Bourdain 64). This appears to be a
true relinquishment of his appearance as a macho man, admitting that he felt true sadness and
cried for the victims of the harsh American presence in the country. He does not include coarse
language or bloody descriptions. Instead, he stops the chapter abruptly with this image of him in
tears. This makes the audience linger on his emotion and feel it themselves, but it also does not
allow for him to lose more respect from readers than he might have already because of his
emotional display. He may gain yet more sympathy from his audience, because he reveals his
emotions so seldom. Even when empathizing with people and showing himself capable of
vulnerability, Bourdain seeks to prove his masculinity.

Throughout his book *A Cook’s Tour*, Anthony Bourdain attempts to validate his position
as a man by describing food and his experiences with overtly masculine language – including a
lot of coarse words, many bloody images of animals being slaughtered and men pummeling each
other, and depictions of women as sex symbols – and a quest for adventure. Though he softens
his approach at times, and sympathizes with victims of war as well as, sometimes, victims of his
appetite, he never fully relinquishes his need for the world to see him as a brawny man capable
of anything. His desire to be seen this way comes from years of society deeming it inappropriate
for men to work in the kitchen other than for preparing a few specific, particularly rugged and
manly meals. While Bourdain is a chef, and therefore seen as more masculine than a man who
might make the meals at home on a day-to-day basis, the idea that food preparation is intended
for women is so ingrained that he, and many other male chefs, must constantly prove to
themselves and the world that they are perfectly capable of performing and witnessing acts of
brutality and strength. Bourdain does sometimes allow vulnerability to show, but quickly moves
on to a subject that is less uncomfortable for him to dwell on.

Though it is his choice to write the way he does, Anthony Bourdain’s insistence on
constantly portraying himself in an overtly masculine light and with coarse and sexual language,
it is not completely his fault. Had American society not pigeonholed cooking into a feminine
endeavor, male cooks, even high-powered chefs like Bourdain, might not feel so inclined to
portray themselves in a conspicuously manly way. It is because of this societal classification of
men and women that pushes male chefs to persistently prove themselves as strapping men who
can do and say all the same bloody, gory, sexual tasks and comments that men in other
professions can.
Bibliography


