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THE FIXERS WHO FED  
ANTHONY BOURDAIN

IN MEMORIAM

# FELLOW TRAVELERS

Behind every one of Anthony Bourdain's 60-minute missives from across the globe was a local who did his or her best to guide the famed host. Following his shocking death, the fixers who knew him best reflect on their time with the star

By LISA ABEND

**LET'S RIDE**  
Anthony Bourdain prepares for a trek through the streets of Hanoi, 2016.



**V**ichiko Zentoh was Anthony Bourdain's first fixer. A freelance television producer in Japan, she worked with Bourdain on the initial two episodes of his first series, *A Cook's Tour*. It was 2000, and Bourdain was no longer working the same kind of schedule at New York's Les Halles brasserie as he had before writing his best-selling *Kitchen Confidential*. Yet in those early shows it's clear he still thinks of himself as a chef first, expertly evaluating a piece of bluefin and remarking on how much

he'd like to get an octopus he sees at Tsukiji Fish Market back into the kitchen. What Zentoh remembers most from those days is his enthusiasm. "He told me, 'I feel like I won the lottery,'" she recalls. "He spent so many years never leaving the kitchen and now he was traveling the world."  
Bourdain's enthusiasm is evident in those early episodes. The characteristic intonation is there, but his voice seems an octave or two higher, and as he delights in a *kaiseki* meal or struggles through a bowl of mucilaginous *natto*, there's a sweetness to his demeanor, a naïveté, that belies the confi-

dence of later years. He's the quintessential innocent abroad—eager for new experiences but left vulnerable by them, too. On-screen, he admits to feeling intimidated, not only by the sumo wrestlers whose practice sessions he attends but even by the bullet train, where the crew shot him eating a bento lunch of eel. "He was very modest, very cautious about protocol," Zentoh says. At one point she corrected his bowl handling, gently suggesting that he stop using both palms to cup it. "He asked me at every step, 'Am I doing it right?' He was the opposite of arrogant." He was also the opposite of profligate. AL-



though at age 44 Bourdain was able, he said, to open a savings account for the first time in his life with the proceeds from *Kitchen Confidential*, budgets during *A Cook's Tour* remained tight. Bourdain traveled in the same van as the rest of the small team, and their accommodations, if not dives, weren't posh. "That's why the geisha in the second episode are so old," Zentoh says. "We couldn't afford younger ones."

Behind every bite of Moroccan sheep testicle or sip of high-octane Georgian *chacha* that Anthony Bourdain took on-screen was a fixer like Zentoh. Before the start of any shoot, from Reykjavik to Congo, the chef turned television star's production company, Zero Point Zero, hired a local—usually a freelance journalist or producer—to suggest segment ideas, set up shoots, get permissions, act as Bourdain's interpreter, and occasionally appear on camera. These fixers may not have written the scripts or edited the footage, but they ultimately played a significant role in what viewers saw on-screen. And because, for the few days or weeks that a shoot lasted, most were also thrust into this suddenly intimate relationship with someone they knew only from TV, they possess a view onto the man that few share.

When news spread in early June that Bourdain had committed suicide at age 61, the shock felt seismic. It wasn't just that he was so influential a figure, though countless viewers learned to eat—lustfully and catholically—from him, and there are legions of chefs today who were drawn to the profession, for better and for worse, by the pirate-ship approach to the kitchen he so vividly described. Nor was it simply the fact of his celebrity, though after nearly two decades spent crisscrossing the globe for his television series, he was recognized on the street everywhere from Beijing to Buenos Aires. It wasn't even the confounding tragedy of his suicide, that he might choose to end a life so seemingly enviable. Rather, the thing that made his death so terribly traumatic to so many was the loss of connection. Bourdain seemed somehow to find time and space for an actual human moment with every person who ever cooked him a meal or even interrupted one to ask for a selfie. It was the loss of that, too.

For those who fixed for him, it was so often more than just a moment. Fixing is among the lowest jobs on the production hierarchy, and yet Bourdain not only treated his fixers well but also engaged with them, soliciting their insight and gradually coming to call several of them friends. Though most never met one another, they formed a sort of unspoken international network, these people who helped Bourdain know the

world more deeply and who, in turn, were shaped by his way of experiencing it.

**M**att Walsh began working for *No Reservations* in 2005. An American journalist living in Hong Kong, Walsh had seen *A Cook's Tour*, recognized the similarities between the emerging star's New Jersey heritage and his Long Island own, and decided he wanted to have the kind of fun Bourdain seemed to be having. He pitched himself to *No Reservations*' producers and was soon leading Bourdain to a roast-duck restaurant in Beijing and a family meal in Chengdu. "It was all new to him, and he was really hungry," says Walsh. "He wanted to see it all, do it all, taste it all."

And imbibe it all. Bourdain made no secret of his predilections. "The Tony we used to work with back then was always laughing and drinking. We got loaded all the time," says Walsh. "By the end of some nights we were all a little slurry."

Bourdain's fixers from those early years recall him as especially happy when he was having the kind of experience that allowed him to connect with a place and its people. After the Khmer Rouge largely destroyed Cambodia's train system, locals used what they called lorries or norries—basically a platform on wheels, outfitted with a rudimentary engine and a hand brake—to travel the rails in areas where there were no roads. On a shoot there in 2010, the crew took one out for a meal with a family in the rice fields. "It was pouring rain, but it didn't matter," Walsh recalls. "Riding back through those electric-green rice paddies, having smoked a lot of weed, with the wind, [from] going 30 kilometers an hour—the sensation of all that—I looked at

Tony and the expression on his face was exactly what I was feeling: it doesn't get better than this."

He was also utterly authentic in his own responses. "There wasn't the slightest bit of hypocrisy from him," says Bibiana Melzi, who fixed for Bourdain in Peru in 2005.

On that episode, Melzi brought the crew to Infierno—literally, "hell"—a hardscrabble settlement in the southeastern part of Peru, where, after an introduction to piranha fishing, Bourdain was invited to try *masato*, an alcoholic drink made throughout the Peruvian Amazon, often by local women, who chew boiled yuca, spit it into a container, and let the enzymes in their saliva act as the fermentation agent. On-screen, Bourdain approaches a big glass of the stuff gamely—"It's like swapping spit with the whole village," he cracks—but only just. "He couldn't reject it because it was a gesture of generosity from the indigenous community," Melzi recounts.



**THE FIXERS ARE IN**  
Clockwise from top left: Bourdain in Mexico, 2001; shooting in West Virginia last year; dining in Hanoi, 2016.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, BY HENRY GARFUNKEL/REDFER; © CNN, BY WILLIAM MERRANE

shoot. "It was a Sunday in Naples, and all the places we wanted to bring him were closed. Finally someone asked the driver, 'Where are you eating?' And he said, 'My mom's house.' So we all went there. . . . She made ragù. We had been eating in these fantastic restaurants up and down the beautiful Amalfi Coast. But that was the happiest I saw him."

In 2012, Bourdain announced he was moving from the Travel Channel to CNN to launch *Parts Unknown*. (The series has six Emmy nominations this year, among them one for Outstanding Informational Series or Special.) By all accounts, he was giddy at the opportunities the new show and the network's resources would afford him; within the first few years, he would shoot episodes in Libya, Tanzania, and Iran. But even to a new fixer such as Alex Roa, a local producer who worked with Bourdain on shoots in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Cuernavaca in 2014, it was evident that the demands—and the constant attention—were weighing on him. "I think it was not only the demands of the job, but also the intensity of it, the constant traveling and being away—in that moment—from his daughter," says Roa.

By then, the eating was the least of it. "He told me that food is just a way to get into people's bodies and minds," Roa recalls. In Oaxaca, when a director wanted to shoot Tony buying and eating tamales from a tamale-seller on the street, he was frustrated, Roa says. "He just said, 'That's horrible. Do you know how many times I've done this before?'" According to Roa, in Mexico City a chef at the Four Seasons hotel sent word he was going to close a room of the restaurant for him; Bourdain's response was a polite but conversation-ending "No thanks."

Were the fame, the pressure, and weariness from all that travel—and all that food—getting to him? Bourdain remained the consummate professional. "We had to ask his

him. As the show grew bigger, there were more elements to each episode. "It was a brutal schedule for the production team. The whole experience was like a goose being made into foie gras. Tony had no time to digest anything—not the food or the experience," Zentoh says.

At that time Bourdain was well on his way to becoming internationally famous. "I met him about halfway into this journey," Mollica says. The Italian fixer glimpsed a hint of what Bourdain was losing during that first

driver to delay and make detours so that he wouldn't show up too early," the fixer says. But he didn't seem to be having as much fun. "He only went out with us one night during the whole 10 days," Roa recalls.

**M**any of those who worked with Bourdain have commented on how he would always stop to pose for a photo or shake a hand. It's not hard to imagine how that level of fame—and the willingness to try to connect across it—eventually became exhausting. "We chalked it up to being tired," says one person who worked with him and who asked to remain anonymous. "But the excitement of the road just wasn't there for him anymore."

With one exception, Matt Walsh worked again with Bourdain in January, the last of 11 shows they would do together. This was the now famous Hong Kong episode, the one that Bourdain's girlfriend, Asia Argento, stepped in to direct and for which Christopher Doyle, a cinematographer the former chef had long revered, served as a director of photography. In the years since that first 2005 shoot with Walsh, Bourdain had changed—both of them had. "He got older, I got older. Drinking and carousing until two or three in the morning just wasn't the right thing to do anymore," Walsh says. Bourdain had grown more distant as well. "I used to be able to just e-mail him and get a direct response, but in recent years, he was very, very busy. On shoots he sometimes seemed distracted or grumpy."

But Hong Kong was different. For one thing, Walsh says, Bourdain was happy. "He and Asia looked really in love. They really dug each other." And Bourdain was thrilled to be working with his idol.

For the fixers who worked for Bourdain during the 16 years he was on television, he was always a figure apart—the famous, adored "talent" who remained engaged in the world and demonstrated the value of trying to truly connect with it. It would be an added tragedy if the very thing that made Bourdain so beloved by them, and by so many others—his ability to experience the world and connect with it authentically—was also the thing his astonishing success eventually eroded. Over the years he worked with him, Walsh saw Bourdain's shadow, saw how he could turn dark and brooding—no more than the rest of us, he adds, though it was still there. But he didn't expect this ending. "I didn't worry about him," Walsh says. "He seemed so powerful, so strong of will. Bulletproof." □

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