

Food for Thought: The Raw Truth --- A New Genre of Food Writing Holds the Garnish

By Robert Templer

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Mr. [Anthony Bourdain] is now the chef at Les Halles, a French restaurant in New York. Kitchen Confidential rolls together a memoir of how he got there, an expose of the terrifying world through the port-holed kitchen door and a guide to eating well or at least not falling prey to the tricks of the trade. Some of these are generally well known, like not eating fish on a Monday (the fish was ordered the previous Thursday), particularly not if it's the special. But you may never again eat swordfish, brunch or hollandaise sauce ("a veritable petri-dish of biohazards"). But don't worry too much. The body, as Mr. Bourdain writes, "is not a temple, it's an amusement park."

So this is life in the professional kitchen, a world of mayhem that makes high-security prisons look like Zen temples. Mr. Bourdain traces his fall and rise from the Culinary Institute of America through grueling jobs at such prestigious restaurants as the Rainbow Room to a low of interviewing for a job at a planned Marla Maples theme restaurant. He did rise again from that nadir to run Les Halles, one of the best French restaurants in New York as well as becoming an accomplished novelist. This journey was accompanied by a prodigious consumption of drugs and alcohol. In these parts, Mr. Bourdain manages to avoid the two traps in writing about drugs - it's very well worn territory and most mind-altering substances render one extremely dull.

"The Primal Feast: Food, Sex, Foraging and Love," by Susan Allport, could hardly be more different from Mr. Bourdain's book, but it also opens up new paths in writing about food. Drawing on evolutionary biology and studies of hunter-gatherers, Ms. Allport puts humans into their natural place in terms of food and examines our eating strategies in light of evolutionary theory.

FULL TEXT

Food writing, like a tottering souffle, is always in danger of collapsing into a mess of preciousness and self-congratulation. Too many odes to truffles and Tuscany, too many PR flacks whipping up trifles about doomed restaurants, too many windy reminiscences and too many appearances by Alice Waters.

The owner of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, an overly pious advocate of natural foods who commands a scary "drink-the-organic-Kool-Aid" devotion among food writers, seems to appear in magazines on a daily basis extolling the virtues of her often dull, totalitarian restaurants (sshhhh, nobody is allowed to say that). Where in all this torrent of gastroporn are the new voices? Where are the laughs? Where's the bite?

At last, they are all here in the form of Anthony Bourdain. This is a man with a deep understanding of food, a refined sense of the disgusting and clearly an extraordinary capacity for both viciousness and generosity. You may never eat out again after reading "Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly" but you will laugh out loud and you'll gain a mass of knowledge that will enable you to avoid bad food and bad restaurants. You may even learn how to cook better and it'll ensure you never make the mistake of opening your own restaurant.

This is food writing as it should be, endowed with real knowledge and unfettered by good manners or loyalty to trade

secrets.

Mr. Bourdain is now the chef at Les Halles, a French restaurant in New York. *Kitchen Confidential* rolls together a memoir of how he got there, an expose of the terrifying world through the port-holed kitchen door and a guide to eating well or at least not falling prey to the tricks of the trade. Some of these are generally well known, like not eating fish on a Monday (the fish was ordered the previous Thursday), particularly not if it's the special. But you may never again eat swordfish, brunch or hollandaise sauce ("a veritable petri-dish of biohazards"). But don't worry too much. The body, as Mr. Bourdain writes, "is not a temple, it's an amusement park."

So this is life in the professional kitchen, a world of mayhem that makes high-security prisons look like Zen temples. Mr. Bourdain traces his fall and rise from the Culinary Institute of America through grueling jobs at such prestigious restaurants as the Rainbow Room to a low of interviewing for a job at a planned Marla Maples theme restaurant. He did rise again from that nadir to run Les Halles, one of the best French restaurants in New York as well as becoming an accomplished novelist. This journey was accompanied by a prodigious consumption of drugs and alcohol. In these parts, Mr. Bourdain manages to avoid the two traps in writing about drugs - it's very well worn territory and most mind-altering substances render one extremely dull.

Fortunately, he has a skill for self-mockery and steers the story away from himself to the characters he meets, from cocaine-crazed chefs to Mafia restaurant owners. This is a family newspaper so I won't go into too many details but there are many moments where you'll laugh and shudder uncontrollably at the same time.

"*The Primal Feast: Food, Sex, Foraging and Love*," by Susan Allport, could hardly be more different from Mr. Bourdain's book, but it also opens up new paths in writing about food. Drawing on evolutionary biology and studies of hunter-gatherers, Ms. Allport puts humans into their natural place in terms of food and examines our eating strategies in light of evolutionary theory.

Much of this seems commonsensical at first but Ms. Allport is adept at providing the rationales for behavior and explaining the scientific debates that lie behind the way we eat. Much of this involves extrapolating from studies of other primates, which is not always a fruitful exercise. She does slip too easily into an evolutionary reductionism that forgets the degree that eating for humans is more cultural than biological. As anthropologists have long held, food is not just good to eat, it has to be good to think.

Nevertheless, the scientific background is illuminating, answering questions such as why our bodies need vitamin C and how Inuit living in the Arctic are able to survive without vegetables -- raw or lightly cooked meat has just enough vitamin C to sustain people. (Cook the meat too long and you will get scurvy, as European sailors did.) Inuit also eat the plant matter from the stomachs of animals that they kill. They have a mostly meat-based diet but consume large amounts of fat to get their energy; a protein-only diet causes the metabolism to speed up perilously, eventually leading to severe malnutrition.

Given all that is available to eat, people are remarkably selective. We almost always search for food that provides us with the most immediate calories, which is why, for example, we don't much bother eating insects. Insects only become part of the diet when they swarm and can be gathered in large quantities or if, like certain plump grubs, they offer a reasonable calorie intake.

Not only are men from Mars and women from Venus but they have substantially different views about food. Essentially, women spend their time looking for food and men spend their time looking for women. For women, building up body fat reserves is important, as they still need to be able to reproduce during food shortages. Hence

women have high body fat levels and are more likely to survive starvation conditions.

For men, there are advantages to controlling women's access to food: What the men keep can be used to feed other women and children. Hence the fact that the most common food taboos involve what and when women eat. Some Australian aborigines share food in this order: old men, hunting men, children, dogs and women, preventing women from eating the most prized of all foods - animal fat.

In evolutionary terms there are two strategies for eating. One is to specialize in a particular foodstuff, which normally requires an adapted digestive system and allows survival on a low-calorie intake. The other, followed by humans, is to eat a lot of different things, requiring a generalized intestine and a large brain to provide the intelligence to find all those foods. It also requires a large calorie intake to fuel the large brain.

While Ms. Allport's book, with its mixture of science and personal anecdotes on eating and foraging, family and sex, grounds some of our understanding of the culture of food in evolution, it sensibly stops short of offering an all-encompassing theory of why we eat what we do. As Mr. Bourdain's book amply shows, most of what we eat is beyond our control.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

DETAILS

Business indexing term:	Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places
Subject:	Restaurants; Body fat; Food; Writing; Foraging behavior; Books; Calories; Inuit; Vitamin C
Publication title:	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
Pages:	8
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2000
Publication date:	Sep 8, 2000
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance

ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315427583
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-raw-truth-new-genre-writing-holds/docview/315427583/se-2?accountid=11311
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Sep 8, 2000
Last updated:	2023-11-20
Database:	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2024 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)