



New York author and chef **Anthony Bourdain**, 52, is best known for his 2000 book, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*. The Brasserie Les Halles' chef at large is now filming the fifth series of *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*. He will present the Sleep European Hotel Design Awards on 6 November at the Sofitel London Heathrow.

I didn't have a pot to piss in. I was 44 years old, standing behind a stove. I was deeply in debt, owned nothing and lived in fear of the revenue service. This was my life. Then overnight I had a bestselling book and the ability to travel anywhere I wanted.

After *Kitchen Confidential* came out, any question of me serving a useful purpose in the restaurant was out the window. It's been about eight years since I cooked regularly. I have a sort of ceremonial position at the restaurant, which means that I don't really do anything at all.

I came into the business like every one else, I became a dishwasher. I was going in no good direction at the time. I never had any respect for myself or anyone else until that point. That dishwashing job saved me. It was a rollicking good time. I could steal lots of food and the girls were cute.

Ideally you find a good mentor. I bumped into a cook in Cape Cod who knew a bit about food and took pride not just in how fast or how many, but in how good the food can be.

The restaurant is a place where people from all backgrounds are forced to work together, and where the good survive and the bad fail. To be a successful chef has always required a strong personality. When Marco Pierre White walks into a room, everybody pays attention. The survival skills that allow someone to be beaten, bollocked and ground up for 17 hours a day in a tough industry make them well-suited to television.

There is an element of pornography in celebrity-chef programmes. It is the same dynamic – a vicarious thrill, people getting off on looking at melting chocolate. But chefs are hopefully inspiring you to eat better, cook better and know what you are putting into your mouth. The British eat better post-Jamie Oliver than pre-Jamie. Don't get me wrong, I hated the Naked Chef with a passion.

Writing is a shiftier profession. The restaurant business is one of extreme



highs and lows but it is also a world of absolutes. You either do well or you fail. Whereas no matter how well you do with books or television, you are never sure how good it is. Nothing beats the feeling of accomplishment when you're walking home after a really busy night in a restaurant. You know exactly where you are in the world and how well you did.

The first time I ate at Fergus Henderson's St John, I walked into the kitchen, got down on my knees and babbled about how this was the greatest meal I have ever eaten. I worship the ground Henderson walks on. What he has done at St John has empowered chefs around the world. To me he is the walking Buddha.

Hotel restaurants have got a lot better thanks to guys like Gordon Ramsay. What started out as a cynical business model has turned out to be a positive thing. You didn't use to see that in a hotel. You had some crap coffee shop with an ancient frog pond and a half-dead Austrian or Swiss chef cranking out some dreary, sad stuff.

Critics have too much power, but thus it has always been. Thank God in New York, they're not bent. You can't buy *The Times*. You can't co-opt them, subvert them or schmooze them. What the press say about you in your first month, what the general buzz is, if it's bad you're toast.

I don't like food nerds. When you are that conscious of what you are eating, you lose something. Eating at its best is a submissive act where you enter a happy, half-drunk dream state. It's about pleasure first and foremost. I don't need to know where my f\*\*\*ing lamb came from, the breed or who the farmer was.

I am contemptuous of anyone who comes from a meat-eating society and has the opportunity to travel the world, and doesn't take advantage of its full spectrum of flavours and colours. The notion that you can live without animal products is all fine and good for Paul McCartney but spend some time in the Amazon and try to see that argument work. It's like the people who think that we should all revert to some wonderful agrarian society, leave the cities en masse and till the fields to grow organic vegetables. The Khmer Rouge had that idea.

Obesity is a societal problem. It is not ok to be unhealthily fat. If you weigh 400lbs, that's a lifestyle choice. If we are escaping from a burning building and you're clogging our means of egress you have become a societal problem.

In the past if you were to tell your girlfriend's family that you were a cook and planning on becoming a chef, it would have been a horrifying pronouncement. Now that equation has changed. Everything has gotten more professional. Beating cooks is not acceptable anymore, even in England. Snorting coke off a cutting board in front of your chefs would be considered letting the team down.

The restaurant business is a place for misfits, people who can't or won't do anything else. If I had got into the business for the wrong reasons, I am sure I would have become a spectacularly unsuccessful minor criminal. This job has to be a passion, an obsession and a refuge.

**Interview by Christopher Kanal**