Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly by Anthony Bourdain

A New York City chef who is also a novelist recounts his experiences in the restaurant business, and exposes abuses of power, sexual promiscuity, drug use, and other secrets of life behind kitchen doors.


About the Author: Anthony Bourdain was born in New York City on June 25, 1956. He graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1978. He wrote numerous nonfiction books including The Nasty Bits, A Cook's Tour, No Reservations: Around the World on an Empty Stomach, Medium Raw, and Appetites: A Cookbook. He also wrote several works of fiction including the graphic novel Get Jiro! and the comic Anthony Bourdain's Hungry Ghosts. He was the host of several television shows including A Cook's Tour, Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations, The Layover, and Parts Unknown. He committed suicide on June 8, 2018 at the age of 61. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. Talk about Bourdain – as a drug-induced young man working his way up through the ranks and eventually, as the more mature executive chef of Brasserie Les Halles. Have his essential qualities changed as he’s aged, or is he basically the same individual, perhaps with a little mellowing around the edges? Is he someone you admire, like, or find offensive? What do you think of him...then and now?

2. Talk about the restaurant business as Bourdain describes it – the mail-dominated, testosterone-drenched atmosphere. What, if any, has your experience been with restaurant kitchens? Do your experiences match Bourdain’s or do they differ? If so, in what way? If you have never worked either as a server or at a food station, would Bourdain’s portrayal encourage you to do so?

3. What is Bourdain’s attitude toward women, the waitresses and the few female cooks he’s worked with?

4. What surprised you most about restaurant dining? What appalled you? Will you EVER order fish on Monday again? What about well-done beef?

5. Talk about the skills required to be a top-notch line cook during a frantic Saturday night dinner service? What are the qualities admired by Bourdain in both line cooks and sous chefs? Do you the ability, either mental or physical, to work in a kitchen environment? Why does Bourdain prefer to work with talent from Mexico, San Salvador or Ecuador over Americans, especially young American men as he was himself?

6. Were you surprised by Bourdain’s frank comparison of Scott Bryan’s career path, success, kitchen management, and cuisine to Bourdain’s own? What are the differences between the two chefs? Which path (be honest now) would you have chosen (not knowing what you know now, but as you were going through it?)

7. Discuss the second-to-last chapter of the book, the so-called Commencement Address. Is the advice
Bourdain offers sound – are they words to live by for anyone in any endeavor? Do you find Bourdain’s warnings hypocritical, or his the voice of a man who has gone through it all and learned from his mistakes? Has he learned from his mistakes?

8. Throughout Bourdain’s memoir, he attempts to impart the reader his adventurous spirit when it comes to trying different types of food. Did he inspire you to try something new? What is the most daring food you’ve ever eaten?

9. Bourdain talks about when he first realized “that food was something other than a substance one stuffed in one’s face when hungry.” What role has food played in your life – while growing up and today – beyond simple sustenance? Why are food and psychology so inextricably linked in our lives?

10. Despite his machismo and unstoppable four-letter language, Bourdain becomes an endearing character himself throughout the course of his memoir. How did you feel as you witnessed his growth throughout *Kitchen Confidential*? In the end, he claims he is an “asshole.” What do you think?

(Questions provided by Madison Public Library and LitLovers)