



10 Apr 5:50 AM

WORLD STREET FOOD CONGRESS 2015

Bourdain to open mega food court in NY

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TV celebrity Anthony Bourdain's business partner reveals the multi-million dollar food court will be a game changer in the US.

ANTHONY Bourdain's plan to bring hawker food to New York City won't be so much a mega food court but a United Nations of food with the co-operation of different countries keen to showcase their culture through food, says the TV celebrity's business partner who was in Singapore this week.

Speaking on the sidelines of the World Street Food Congress where he also delivered a speech about the project, Stephen Werther reveals that when Bourdain Market opens in Manhattan, New York, in early 2016, it will comprise 100,000 sq ft of space hosting some 100 street food vendors from around the world, cooking authentic cuisine from countries as diverse as Singapore and Bolivia.

Playing a pivotal role in curating the 100 stalls is KF Seetoh, founder of Makansutra who also first introduced Mr Bourdain - the brash author of Kitchen Confidential and host of TV food shows No Reservations and Parts Unknown - to Singapore hawker food during his visits to the city. In fact, the idea for Bourdain Market came about after he fell in love with the hawker centres here and announced his plan for the mega food centre as far back as early 2014.

Now that they have done most of the groundwork involving the financing, conceptualising and the actual location of the market - which Mr Werther says will be revealed in a few weeks' time - the next step is to identify the vendors who will take part in the market.

For that, Mr Seetoh will be plugging into his and Mr Bourdain's extensive international network to identify the right individuals, he says. "It will be a big, friendly, in-your-face experience where nothing is diluted and people will be able to watch these artisans cooking just like they do at home." He's even hoping to create social enterprises to help displaced people from developing countries, "to support them through this market".

"The idea about authenticity means different things to different people," says Mr Werther. "It means one thing to Bourdain - that someone from Singapore comes and has the chicken rice and says, 'That's the real thing - that's what I would get at home'. This will be a tour of the world, a view of different cultures through the food that everybody eats. It's not elitist, it's a democratic egalitarian experience where it's affordable, delicious, historical and real."

The logistical challenge of pulling so many different people from so many countries together is a challenge that is not lost on them. "It's going to take a tremendous amount of heavy lifting to create the stage for all these different people to come in and do this."

"Some will do it for a short period of time, some will do it permanently, some will relocate to New York, some will come and train and leave."

"We will provide the support and infrastructure for all the different ways that someone can be involved in the market. We will work directly with individuals, the cities or countries through the tourism boards."

The project's unprecedented size and ambition does not come cheap, and Mr Werther estimates the cost to be in the tens of millions, and certainly more than US\$20 or US\$30 million. But financing it has not been an issue as "there were more people willing to finance it than we need," says Mr Werther. They have already hired top New York designers Roman & Williams to design the space.

With such a big investment, they are not relying just on the vendors to bring in revenue for the project. There will be a farmer's market, a butchery, rooftop beer garden, oyster bar and tapas bar. "We will also have something we call internally as a 'Global Spotlight'," says Mr Werther. "It will change four times a year and focus on a city or country that Bourdain has featured in one of his shows. So it could be Spain (Barcelona) or Japan (Tokyo) and we will work with the tourism boards to create a complete experience of the place. Not just prepared food or packaged food but serving ware, cookware, cookbooks, cooking demos, everything to promote the area."

Mr Werther recalls how Mr Bourdain did a show in China and was invited to "a fancy wine cellar with billionaire businessmen". One of them told Mr Bourdain that he was like a UN ambassador of food. "Which is an honour and privilege for him, and a great responsibility for me."

That's why Mr Bourdain wants the market "to be game changing - for the way Americans and New Yorkers eat," adds Mr Werther. "He's very careful about not selling out his brand. This market needs to be something that has a soul and purpose. It has to have a value for the city of New York and the people who visit it, not just a way to make money. He wants it to be his legacy."

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