



Manila, Philippines

Title: We Get Political with Anthony Bourdain at the World Street Food Congress 2017

Date of publication: June 2 2017

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Name of publication: <http://www.pepper.ph/get-political-anthony-bourdain-world-street-food-congress-2017/>

American writer, television host and chef Anthony Bourdain (or Tito Tony, as we like to call him in our imaginary hangouts) is currently in the Philippines attending the World Street Food Congress 2017 (WSFC17). Organized by KF Seetoh of Makansutra, the Street Food Congress aims to preserve and professionalize street food culture while celebrating street food as it has been, is, and can become. Bourdain and Seetoh are long-time friends, with Seetoh having appeared in an episode of Bourdain's travel and food show *No Reservations*. Now Bourdain has enlisted Seetoh's assistance in his pursuit to recreate a Hawker Centre-like experience in New York City with the Bourdain Market—a food market that will celebrate authentic cuisine from food vendors all over the world.

Bourdain has never been one to shy away from politics or ask hard questions, saying in yesterday's talk: "There is nothing more political than food. Food is a reflection—it may be the most direct and obvious reflection—of who we are, where we come from, what we love, who eats in a country, who doesn't eat." His shows feature him speaking about the political history of the places he visits, and often sitting down with politicians to discuss the climate. Pepper.PH asked him three questions that, if one were ever to ask a celebrity chef (yes, we know he hates being referred to as such), Bourdain would be best equipped to answer.

ON FOOD IN TODAY'S POLITICAL CLIMATE

"[There] seems to be a rising tide in protectionism and nationalism everywhere, but at the same time, never has the American or even European dining public been more open or more interested in food from other places, I think to a great extent it's a generational thing. Young people are more open to exploring the world and exploring the flavors of the rest of the world. Older people, in many cases, who have seen what they saw as a way of life, like a country they grew up in disappearing, they are resisting and they see foreign as dangerous . . . I can only be hopeful that the good guys prevail . . . What is American food? American food is whoever is cooking in America right now. We're an immigrant culture. Very little of our national cuisine originated in the continent, in the continental United States. It was all from someplace else . . . I'm a believer in food democracy."

ON HIS ROLE IN THE GENTRIFICATION OF LOCAL FOOD SPOTS

“That’s a really good question. We wrestle with it a lot in the show. I go out there with my crew looking for the sort of place that locals love that hasn’t been discovered or changed. It’s really the same thing we’ve always done . . . You get a place in Bali . . . and of course it was fantastic. Filled with locals, affordable, delicious, and after the show, a lot of tourists showed up. A lot! And I’m sure the owners were pretty happy. They could make a hell of a lot more money and they had to expand a lot, so I don’t know that they have any complaints. They’re making a lot more money. They can take better care of their families, maybe expand the business more, but we understand that: What happens now? What happens when they make so much money that they can send their kids to get engineering degrees and they may not want to continue the family business? Is that a good thing? Probably, for them! Most families working in Hawker centers or farming for that matter, they’re working so that their kids don’t have to do that. As much as I would like to see people committed for the next 60 years making food in the family tradition, I think that’s an unfair hope. We try to do harm. There have been rare times on the show where we find a place that’s so awesome and locals love it so much that I won’t tell people the name of the place—I’m not going to say the name of the place or where it is. If you really want to find it, you can figure out the clues.”

ON APPROACHING THIRD-WORLD COUNTRIES AS A TOURIST

“I go to a lot of places. Most places you go to as a tourist, which is a privilege and a luxury. It implies that we are already reasonably comfortable enough to afford a plane ticket, a hotel. You’re doing something that’s basically frivolous or recreational. More often than not, you arrive in countries where frivolity and recreation are unimaginable luxuries. Many if not most of the places I go to, the disparity between rich and poor are extreme, and oft times you are patronizing businesses that you love who are doing a very difficult thing over under extremely difficult conditions, and one could only recognize and respect that. Delicious food does not exist in a bubble. It is a reflection of a lot of years of hard work, difficult circumstances, of limited food choices and options. I think the more we know our food, where it comes from and who’s making it, the better for the world. But it doesn’t exactly solve the world’s problems. We need to reach in with awareness and empathy.”

ON THE NAME OF THE BOURDAIN MARKET

On a lighter note, for the Bourdain fans who were understandably confused by the name of the market given the TV host’s public disdain for blatant commercialization, he had this to say*:

“Yeah, honestly, it wasn’t my idea. I was embarrassed by the whole thing and I hate the idea of having my name on the market. I wish they could come up with something better.” (Interviewer: So you’re owning it?) “Reluctantly. I write books about me, I make television shows about me, I talk about me a lot, but I really don’t need my name on the market. That was never the plan. I just thought it was a very cool project. It’s the sort of thing that New York doesn’t have that they should have had in my view decades ago. I never understood why we didn’t. It was a small price to pay, I guess, to move this mammoth project along. They said they want to put my name on it, I said, (groans) okay . . . ‘The Market.’ That would be good.”

*NOTE: The last answer published above was from a question asked by Food Magazine.