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**Title:** Street food: a distillation of a country's aspirations

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The host of CNN's travel and food show Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown was in Manila last week to participate in the World Street Food Congress (WSFC), held from May 31 to June 1 in the Mall of Asia Concert Grounds. Here, a long line of street food vendors from all over the world sold their wares, as a way of letting people get a taste of what their country cherishes.

This is completely in line with Mr. Bourdain's interests, seeing as he is planning to open a street food market in New York City in about two years ([bourdainmarket.com](http://bourdainmarket.com)). "New York is a city of immigrants. It's not a place, it's an idea," he said. This project will give New York a space akin to those in Bangkok, Vietnam, and Singapore, which promote the simple joys of street food.

He talked about one of his worst meals, a miserable cheeseburger in an airport Johnny Rockets, where a cook plopped an already-cooked cheeseburger on a plate, put some already-cooked fries on the same plate, and pushed it towards him. "We looked at each other, all of us," he recounted. "We all shared a moment of perfect misery. They understood that they were at the tailend of a long corporate machine that just didn't give a fuck, and so did I."

"Street food is the cure to this. It's about a single person, or a limited number of people, who have figured out, 'This is what I'm good at; this is what I'm proud of.'"

Seeing as the bulk of Mr. Bourdain's travels in his television shows takes him to the backstreets and the holes-in-the-wall of certain cities, street food is dear to Mr. Bourdain's heart. During a talk he gave during the WSFC, he said that street food is important -- as a practical matter, according to him, it's because when Americans are asked where they would like to go on vacation to spend valuable tourism dollars, the number one factor they consider is the food.

More importantly, however, to him, street food is the most honest distillation of a country's history and its aspirations.

"I'm often told on my show, don't talk about politics, stick to the food. And that's true enough. I'm not a journalist." He labels himself as an "enthusiast," after having been in the restaurant business

for 30 years, starting out in seafood restaurants down in Massachusetts and working himself up to Brasserie Les Halles in Manhattan.

“There is nothing more political than food,” he says.

“Food is a reflection, maybe 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.” “I often say that wealthy cultures that have been... prosperous, generally don’t cook very well, because they never had to,” he added. Based on his experience, cultures which have had to make do -- because of struggle, because of hardship -- make “wonderful things.”

Perhaps one only has to look at the example of Japan: despite a shortage of natural resources in ancient times, the country made wonderful things with fresh food straight from the sea, combining it with preserves, resulting in dishes that take elements of time and space.

Great cuisines in the world, say the French, take cues from food eaten by peasants who have had to scabble -- and even royals who have had to make do, such as in the legend of the first French onion soup, where apparently, Louis XIV, having no viable ingredients in his hunting lodge, mixed liquids (including champagne) and onions to make a meal.

“Cooking is about transformation, about taking what we have, however little that might be, whether it’s a pig tail or a pig’s foot,” Mr. Bourdain said. “Over time, you learn how to coax flavors, and texture, and magic out of a humble ingredient like that.” One suddenly thinks about the invention of crispy pata, one of the country’s most beloved dishes, invented by a restaurant heir supposedly after running out of better pig parts.

But more than skill, virtuosity, and imagination, at the core, to Mr. Bourdain, the magic of food is in the emotions that food might foster. The rituals of cooking, feeding, and eating, all lead up to making us feel something, anything, beyond sensorial pleasure. Speaking about his friends, some of the greatest chefs in the world, he said that these people would decline an evening out after work in yet another fancy restaurant, calling it a “living hell.” “What chefs crave -- people who spend their lives working with food -- is a simple, good thing,” he said. “Something you eat with your hands and experience emotionally. Not critically.”

“I want to experience food emotionally, like a child. I want to be lost in the moment. I want to take a bite of food that takes me to another time, and another place, whether it’s my childhood, or somebody else’s childhood.” After all, as in the movie *Ratatouille* (arguably one of the best food movies of the last decade), critic Anton Ego’s moment of enlightenment is not in enjoying a particularly special dish, but a dish that brought him back to his mother; a more innocent time when pleasure did not cost much.

While of course, since Mr. Bourdain has already established what street food means to a people, at the other end of the spectrum, what does haute cuisine, or high-end food, do for the same people, for the same purpose? Using the now-closed *elBulli*, hailed once as the world’s best restaurant, as an example, he said: “They were always designed to evoke an emotional response. They were not there

to dazzle. They were not there to say solely, 'Look at me, look at how brilliant I am.' There was of course an element of that, as with any artist."

"The determining factor is understanding that we are humans, with [a] past, that there is a context in which we operate. Food, even at the highest level, should, in my view at least, be reflective of who is talking to me. What are they saying? What are they saying about themselves? What do we share?"