

# Anthony Bourdain's Lasting Legacy

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This spring, April 14 to be exact, will mark the 10th anniversary of the debut of *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* on CNN. The show ran for 12 seasons, right up until Bourdain's untimely death in 2018.

Although it has spurred imitators in the travelogue and food space hosted by the likes of Stanley Tucci, Marcus Samuelsson and Padma Lakshmi, *Parts Unknown's* gonzo mix of wry sociopolitical commentary and renegade spirit gave it a distinct edge, and made it hard to pin down.

According to Lydia Tenaglia, cofounder with husband Chris Collins of Zero Point Zero—the production company behind Bourdain's signature shows dating back to *A Cook's Tour* on the Food Network (2002–03)—*Parts Unknown* represented the culmination of Bourdain's aspirations as a TV writer, host and executive producer.

"The shows became more deeply complex, sociopolitical, strongly essayistic," Tenaglia tells *Produced By*. She likens the evolution to advanced stages of education. "*Cook's Tour* was like high school," she adds, "*No Reservations* on the Travel Channel was like college, and on *Parts Unknown* he had become a sort of professor emeritus."

If some viewers thought *Parts Unknown* had become too topical at the expense of a more foodie focus, there was never any blowback from CNN, which used the show as a springboard for its 2013 move into original, unscripted programming and documentaries.

"They saw the show as this incredible, story-driven extension of the news," says Tenaglia. "While it wasn't current events, so many people said Tony was as much a journalist exploring journalistic topics as anyone on the news side."

This meant forays into ever more difficult and challenging destinations like Afghanistan, Iran and Libya—"complicated locations with complicated histories," as Tenaglia describes them.

It also meant a more cinematic approach to the series, drawing upon Bourdain's cinephile leanings and his encyclopedic knowledge of films and literature. For example, the season one episode on the Congo references Joseph Conrad's haunting novella *Heart of Darkness* and the Vietnam war epic that it inspired, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. And the season 11 spotlight on Hong Kong is stylistically influenced by the movies of Wong Kar-wai, whose frequent collaborator, the DP Christopher Doyle, even shot parts of the episode.



COURTESY CHRIS COLLINS

Producer Lydia Tenaglia and Anthony Bourdain, en route to the next exotic location and revelatory meal.

As the desire to innovate grew with each new episode, so did Bourdain's exacting nature. "Tony was very emphatic about the topics he wanted to cover, and the way he wanted to cover them," Tenaglia explains. "More often than not, he got his way." In the process, the exchanges between Bourdain and the Zero Point Zero principals would get "spirited," as Tenaglia euphemistically puts it.

"He would be a real asshole with us and we would be assholes back," Tenaglia recalls. "And we loved each other."

Bourdain's stubborn perfectionism, the series' relentless pace (Bourdain was on the road for three-quarters of the year), and what Tenaglia called a "grueling, absolutely punishing schedule" eventually took their toll, leading to burnout for many involved. It also led to an existential crisis for a host who had gained such gravitas that he'd end up sitting opposite President Barack Obama in Hanoi for a meal during season eight.

The show's lasting legacy, though, is solidified, having earned two PGA Awards, 12 Emmys and a Peabody—TV's equivalent of a Nobel Prize.

"He left a major imprint on all the people's lives who worked on this series," says Tenaglia. "It was something that deeply challenged everybody." ■