The Man Who Ate It All

With *Parts Unknown*, now in its 11th season, Anthony Bourdain continues a restless odyssey to understand our global community through food.

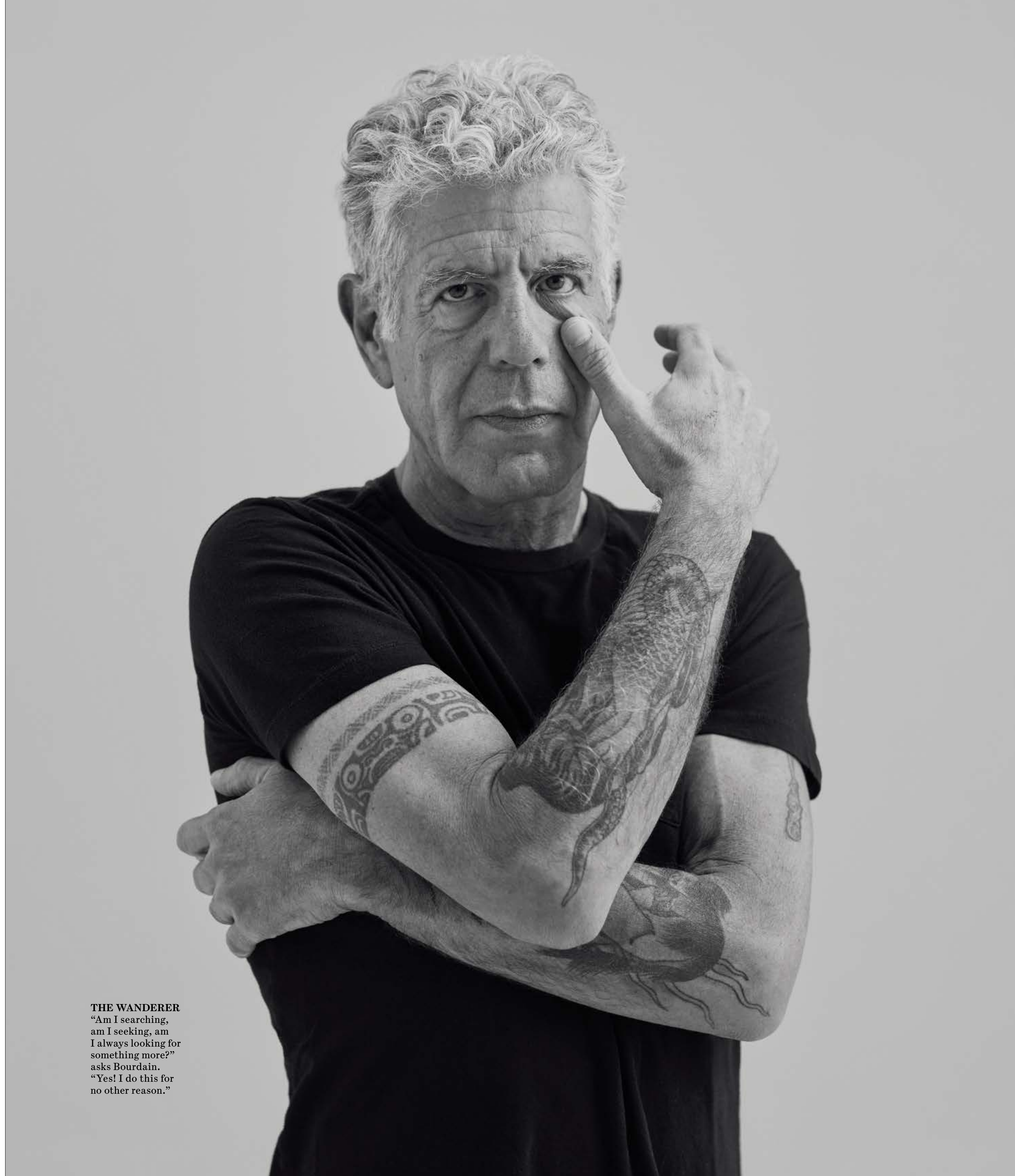
BY HOWIE KAHN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ETHAN JAMES GREEN

THE WINDOWS IN Anthony Bourdain's apartment, where he lives alone on the 64th floor of a Midtown skyscraper, stretch from floor to ceiling, looking south over Manhattan and west across the Hudson River. Inevitably, the view conjures thoughts of setting off into the distance—fitting for Bourdain, 61, who travels more than 250 days a year to shoot his CNN show *Parts Unknown*. "Do you know the German word *Sehnsucht*?" he asks. "It means feeling homesickness for a place you've never been." Bourdain, whom everybody calls Tony, is rapping his fingers against the velvet armchair in which he sits. He fidgets constantly. "What about *saudade*?" he says. "That's a great one. It's Portuguese: a longing, for a place you may get to but will probably never go." It's 11:30 a.m. He offers me a beer and starts smoking. "Am I searching, am I seeking, am I always looking for something more? Yes!" he says. "I do this for no other reason."

Self-indulgent though he makes it seem, *Parts Unknown*, over 10 seasons and 80 episodes (nominated for 25 Emmys, winning five), has told tales that might otherwise never be told on television—or not with the same degree of empathy. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bourdain confronted a nation scarred by genocide and marred by fractious bands of rebels. In Libya, he faced the fallout from the 2011 revolution, meeting young activists who supported it, many of whom still visibly ache for a more open society. Bourdain, who insists he's not a journalist ("I want you to feel the way I feel when I see things," he says), has at times risked his life to produce his show. In Congo a crew member was robbed and battered. On approach to Misurata, Libya, he was given instructions on how to use an automatic weapon in case his crew came under fire.

Despite regularly venturing into war-torn regions, Bourdain stresses that he's uncomfortable being called an activist. His show, he points out, leaves plenty of room for levity and experimentation. One ongoing conceit pits Bourdain against his closest chef friend, Le Bernardin's Eric Ripert, in a gonzo eating contest that spans, from season to season, the Andes to the French Alps. There have been segments about tentacle fetishes in Tokyo and a fantasy sequence that depicts Ripert as an action hero. "We do impressionistic and psychedelic. We've gone totally off the rails," Bourdain says. But there's no denying that, in the current geopolitical climate, Bourdain's approach increasingly thrusts him into an ambassadorial role. Through the lens of *Parts Unknown*—which, according to CNN, is the highest-rated cable news program in its time slot—he is offering a globalist alternative to "America First."

That others have placed him in this role is apparent the following evening, as reports of a disparaging comment made by President Trump about El Salvador, Haiti and Africa a few days prior are still roiling the news cycle. Bourdain has been invited to appear on *The Daily Show*. He's sitting in the greenroom, making a noiseless snapping motion with his fingers, when host Trevor Noah walks in to greet him. As Bourdain talks about a recent harrowing flight into Bhutan for an episode in the 11th season, which begins airing April 29, one story of turbulence leads to another: two incidents of food poisoning (Namibia and Liberia); hot-chicken-related gastric problems in Nashville; staying in a room in Cambodia and discovering a trail



THE WANDERER
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of footprints, in dried blood, up the wall; his experience at a villa in Congo, "with no power, where the toilets hadn't been flushed in decades."

"I watch you travel all around the world," Noah tells him. "I base a lot of my own travel on where you go."

Bourdain, who is shrewdly topical, knows why he's here: "Can I say the word *shithole* on your show?" he asks.

"Let's get into it," Noah says.

BOURDAIN'S SENSE OF décor is also a little confrontational. His apartment is appointed with statues of gods and monsters from around the world. There are framed works by the Welsh artist Ralph Steadman and black-and-white photographs of Fidel Castro and Iggy Pop. In Bourdain's galley kitchen hangs a print bearing the phrase, "Eat Pray Get the F— Out."

A couple of his Emmys are perched above his desk. "If I don't write first thing in the morning," he says, "I'm done. I get duller, stupider and lazier as the day progresses." Bourdain's bedroom is dominated by empty shelf and wall space. In his shower sits a complete collection of travel-size toiletries from the Chateau Marmont, his Los Angeles hotel of choice. "I'm part of a dysfunctional family there," he says.

In the living room, on a shelf with his books—*Learned Pigs & Fireproof Women*, by Ricky Jay, and a volume on the legacy of Syrian-Lebanese cooking in Trinidad and Tobago among them—sits a mounted skull and a Victorian-era trepanning kit that was used to drill through it. Bourdain's collection of bygone surgical tools reflects his desire to bore beneath bone toward the messier business of what defines us. It's been theorized that, historically, trepanation was used to set evil spirits free.

Bourdain's push toward deep character studies propelled his CNN colleague Christiane Amanpour to pitch him the idea for her new series, *Sex & Love Around the World*, which debuted on the network in March. The six-part program, for which Bourdain is an executive producer, examines attitudes toward intimacy in locations as far-flung as Beirut, Delhi and Accra. Amanpour says the narratives she wants to tell about sexuality follow a storytelling model pioneered by Bourdain. "He takes something as fundamentally universal as food and turns it into an odyssey about humanity that's gritty, real and surprising. It makes for compulsory television," she says. "His belief in my idea gave me great confidence."

Food functions like a Trojan horse on *Parts Unknown*, with meals opening the door to a broader discourse. The series' first eating sequence, a 2013 breakfast in Yangon, Myanmar, finds Bourdain discussing government-mandated news censorship with journalist U Thiha Saw, who says he was imprisoned twice for breaking the rules. The show's highest-profile meal came in its eighth season, in 2016: Bourdain with then President Barack Obama inside a Hanoi, Vietnam, noodle house, talking about diplomacy, statecraft and optimism while slurping *bún cha*. The White House had contacted *Parts Unknown* about getting Obama on the show. The presidential overture confirmed something Bourdain already knew—he had transcended the culture from which he came. "I haven't been a chef in 20 years," he reminds me, asserting that he's not a celebrity-chef either. Rather, he's a full-blown celebrity. Tabloids run photos of his abs. "The word *celebrity* is not a compliment," Bourdain says, "but I'll live with it since it's afforded me so many things."

Bourdain grew up in Leonia, New Jersey, a middle-class suburb of New York City. His mother, Gladys, worked as a copy editor at the *New York Times*. His father, Pierre, was a Yale-educated record executive, specializing in classical music. Bourdain dropped out of Vassar after his second year and later attended the Culinary Institute of America. After graduating he got a job on the line at the Rainbow Room in Manhattan, in 1978.

"There was brutal hazing there," Bourdain says. "To be honest, it was sexual abuse. One chef walked by me multiple times a day for the first couple of weeks and would wind his hand up and smack my ass. Over time, that became not just smacking my ass, but driving his fingers up my ass to the great amusement of the entire kitchen." Bourdain soon put a stop to this. "He came by one time while I was stirring *crespelle Toscana* with a meat fork, and I timed it. I knew he was coming in with a hand, and I just turned that fork around and came down with it as hard as I could. I sunk that thing in up to the knuckle. His hand blew up like a football. I didn't have a problem with him after that."

Bourdain spent the next two decades moving from kitchen to kitchen. "Very low- to medium-level stuff," he says. He remembers himself as serially unemployable throughout his 20s and into his 30s, owing to an addiction to cocaine, heroin and crack. "I worked under the name Napoleon Bourdain at one point so I could both collect unemployment and get paid," he says. In 1987, he was "cracking oysters and clams for drunks" at a West Village restaurant called Formerly Joe's, he recalls, when he learned his father had died at the age of 57. "He died thinking of me as a guy who squandered my opportunities, my advantages, my education. A guy in his 30s who was hitting him up for money, probably for drugs," Bourdain says. Continuing to talk about his father, Bourdain chokes up. "It's a major regret of my life."

After almost a decade of trying to wean himself off drugs, including a period on methadone, Bourdain finally got clean. "There were some really ugly close calls," he says. "I was forced on my knees with a knife at my throat. I was robbed at gunpoint." Once sober, Bourdain wrote and published two crime novels to little acclaim. Then, in 2000, while working as the chef at a Manhattan brasserie called Les Halles, Bourdain published *Kitchen Confidential*.

Writing made Bourdain famous in a way his cooking never could. His food had been fine, culminating in serviceable steaks sauced correctly, but his prose was jolting. On the page, he was wry, confessional and self-effacing. He exposed restaurants as gritty and flawed while never relinquishing their romance. "I don't think any contemporary piece of food writing has been as influential," says Daniel Halpern, who published *Kitchen Confidential* in paperback and has since become his editor at Ecco as well as a partner in Bourdain's eponymous imprint there (Ecco is owned by News Corp, which also owns *The Wall Street Journal*). "It's an iconic piece of writing," Halpern says. "It opened the memoir genre, and not just about food, for many people who came after."

A Cook's Tour, Bourdain's second nonfiction book, launched his television career when the Food Network dealt him into their lineup in 2002 for 35 episodes of a show by the same name. His Travel Channel series *No Reservations* ran from 2005 through 2012, and its spinoff, *The Layover*, aired from 2011 to 2013. "I hated that show deeply," says Bourdain. "It was a travel guide, which is everything I don't want to be. And of course it ruined us, because as soon as we did *The Layover* that's all the network wanted." Bourdain moved to CNN and launched *Parts Unknown* later that year. "Everybody understands that if I can't do it my way, I'm perfectly willing to walk out," he says.

Hanging on the wall above Bourdain's desk, opposite his Emmys, is a photograph taken in late 2016 during *Parts Unknown*'s season-eight finale. In it, Bourdain is sitting with the actress and director Asia Argento on a marble bench at Rome's Palazzo dei Congressi. Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci had used the palazzo as an asylum in his 1970 drama, *The Conformist*. Knowing the reference, Bourdain, whose grasp of film history is professorial, made it the setting for an intense conversation with Argento about abandoned places, making art in the face of conflict, familial shame and Mussolini's hanging.

Argento, 42, and Bourdain had fallen in love while shooting the Rome episode, for which he originally enlisted her as a local expert. The 41-minute final cut, spanning multiple locations and themes, was nominated for a cinematography Emmy. In retrospect, it was also an extended first date, and one Bourdain thought was coming to an end too soon amid the fascist architecture. "It was a very sad scene," he says. "I think both of us thought it overwhelmingly likely that we would never see each other again."

While shooting in Rome, Bourdain's second marriage was ending. His first, to high school girlfriend Nancy Putkoski, lasted 20 years and ended in divorce in 2005. He married Ottavia Busia, who had been a hostess at Le Bernardin and is now a Brazilian jujitsu instructor, in 2007, the same year their daughter, Ariane, was born. By the time he'd met Argento, Bourdain says, he'd given up on the concept of romantic love. "I was dead," he says. Now he keeps Froot Loops and Crunch Berries in his kitchen for whenever Argento and her two kids come from Rome to visit.

Last October, Argento became one of the #MeToo movement's most amplified voices after telling the *New Yorker* that Harvey Weinstein sexually assaulted her in 1997. In the months since, Bourdain's public support for her has been loud and unwavering. "I met one extraordinary woman with a story, and suddenly it was all personal," he says. "Like a lot of men I am re-examining my life. What I realize is I do not know people's secret pain. I don't know what they've been living with." Bourdain admits to some previous bad behavior and promises a correction. "Regular staples of my shows were Paris Hilton jokes, Kardashian jokes, some of them really misogynistic. I'm the sort of person who would make random, cruel comments about famous people I don't know and have never met. I think about those things now."

Because of his relationship with Argento, Bourdain says, women began to share stories with him of sexual abuse in the food industry, a world he says he's hardly plugged into, just before the Mario Batali story broke in December. "They started telling me things they had never said before," he says, "to my shame, for no other reason than my association with Asia. I'm now asked to talk about this, which is uncomfortable because I am taking up space. It should not be about me. And every time I open my mouth it suddenly becomes about me. If I don't talk about it even more, it's because of that."

Bourdain says his next book—a collection of essays, many of which will touch on the theme of loneliness—will be more emotional than anything he's ever attempted. "When you've been married twice, you think about things like, How does one love? And how can one be loved?" He's also working on a scripted TV project and trying to secure financing. "In no way are the episodes related other than their location," he says. "We might do one season in New York, another in Berlin, another in Tokyo." From 2010 to 2013, Bourdain wrote for David Simon's HBO series *Treme*, taking the lead on the show's food-related scenes. "The only thing I had to do with his scenes was shorten them," says Simon. "He had great lines. They were about something. He's not just a voice from the kitchen. I keep thinking, When can I use him again?"

After the *Daily Show* taping, Bourdain is at a dinner celebrating James Syhabout's new cookbook, *Hawker Fare: Stories & Recipes From a Refugee Chef's Isan Thai & Lao Roots*, at Wildair on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The book is published by Bourdain's imprint at Ecco, which will release three more titles this year, including a memoir by journalist Jason Rezaian about spending 18 months imprisoned in Iran and *We Fed an Island*, chef José Andrés's account of giving aid to Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria.

Syhabout's book is filled with stories and recipes about the type of food that might have been cooked at the hawker center Bourdain sought to bring to Manhattan's Pier 57. News of his food hall started circulating nearly half a decade ago; cooks from all over the world were to be brought here to work together in a global marketplace. But no lease was ever signed, and Bourdain realized his desire to create things did not include a real-estate development erected in his name. "It somehow got labeled 'Bourdain Market,'" he says. "I just wanted a place I could go eat." He walked away from the deal late last year. "I'm not going to tell somebody from Mexico who is running a street cart, who's a better cook than I ever was, that I'm going to change their world in a positive way when I don't know that I can."

When a server leaves a magnum of wine on our table for us to finish, I ask Bourdain whether his ceaseless projects ever exhaust him and whether he plans to seek more balance in his life. "Too late for that," he says. "I think about it. I aspire to it. I feel guilty about it. I yearn for it. Balance? I f—ing wish."

David Bowie's "Space Oddity" begins to play throughout the restaurant; it prompts a story from Bourdain: "I once said to my daughter, 'Baby, I'm thinking about quitting my job to spend more time with you, a couple of years, I'll get off this f—ing pony.' And she burst into tears and said, 'But Dada, your job is so interesting!' OK. No getting off the pony." Bourdain knocks back more wine. "I'm resigned to the fact that I'm in orbit." ●

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—DAVID SIMON

FORCE OF NATURE

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anything," Bündchen says of Brady. "You should see our closets....It's so funny. I would say that he likes fashion more than I like fashion. I would say he's changed his haircut in one year more than I've changed in my whole life."

Overall, Bündchen says she gets way more credit for Brady's moves than she deserves. She mentions the recent *Tom vs Time* Facebook documentary—she says it took a lot of convincing to get her on board to allow the cameras into their home.

"People are like, 'Oh, Gisele must have told Tom [to do it],'" she says. "He's the one who had to come and ask me."

Bündchen has spoken in the past about her concerns with Brady's football career, given the growing science about the long-term impact of concussions. "I'm entitled to have my concerns because my husband is the father of my children," she says. "If you don't have your health, what do you have?"

At the same time, Bündchen sees how passionate Brady remains about the game, how much joy he takes in playing, even now in his 40s.

"It's not my decision to make," she says of any retirement talk for Brady. "It's his decision, and he knows it. It wouldn't be fair any other way.

"He's so focused right now," she says. "He has a laser focus on just winning and being the best, and I said, 'You know what? This is what you're doing right now in your life, and you need to feel complete in it, because if I'm the one who comes and says something and then you make a decision based on something that I said—'"

He'd resent it?

"Yeah, and I would never in my life, ever. I want him to be happy. Believe me, I've been with him when he's losing. Try to be with him after you have lost [Super Bowls]. I mean, I had my fair share, OK? As long as he's happy, he's going to be a better father, he's going to be a better husband, and I just want him to be happy. I do have my concerns, like anyone would."

It's such a strange combination of professional worlds to straddle: fashion and football. I ask Gisele what would happen if she put Karl Lagerfeld at a table with Brady's famously taciturn coach, Bill Belichick.

"I think they could have an interesting conversation, because they are very intelligent people," she says, smiling. "I would love to be at that table."

Bündchen's decade in Boston is the longest she has stayed in one place since her childhood. There are deep roots—not to mention an emotional connection with a sports-mad region.

I ask her if she can do a Boston accent. She laughs. "I can't," she says. "I know 'wicked awesome.'"

Trust me, the next time you run into Gisele, ask her to say "wicked awesome." It's the best.

This is Gisele's life now. Soon her kids will be home from school. There will be family dinner, phones off. There will be questions (the other day, Benjamin asked: "Mom, what's a celebrity?"). There will be the noise of a busy house. And maybe later, there will be Munchkins, because Gisele Bündchen now knows that Munchkins are wicked awesome. ●