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Dishing with Andrew Zimmern about bizarre foods

Monday November 29, 2010 12:00 PM By Jessica Damiano



Photo credit: Handout

So I was hangin' with Andrew Zimmern this morning (OK, I spoke to him on the phone) and he regaled me with tales of his travels and gustatory escapades. The James Beard Award-winning host of the Travel Channel's "Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern travels the world seeking authentic cultural experiences through food.

What sort of food did you grow up eating?

"Everything. My parents were what would be described today as very food-forward, food-nerd types, but those definitions didn't exist back then. My mom and dad loved to travel and loved to eat. Go figure, I picked that vibe up. New York City was not the city it is today. When I was growing up in the '60s, you had to go out and look and hunt things down, and my dad was one of those people. So going to Arthur Avenue to hunt down dried mushrooms wasn't that easy, but my dad did that. My mom learned to cook from Trader Vic, so she cooked more interesting food than most other people. She was into things way before they were trendy. Same with my dad.

I understand you're originally from New York. Where exactly did you grow up?

On 71st Street on the East Side. "We had a place . . . in East Hampton, starting in the early '60s. I remember when the Long Island Expressway was built. We used to take an old rural route out there, it would take hours. We would go past duck farms and get duck eggs, and my dad would make duck confit. On weekends we went to butcher shops and vegetable stands, it was a great food life.

I'm curious about what educational background would prepare you for

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bizarre food-hunting.

"I went to the Dalton School my whole life, and then Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. I majored in history and art history."

When did you acquire an interest in bizarre foods and exotic travel?

"My show is not about weird foods, it's about foods that are traditional in different cultures. In Minnesota at Christmas time, they eat lutefisk. In Samoa, they eat salted, fermented sea cucumber with every meal. I'm curious when I get there. I always say, 'One and a half billion Chinese can't be wrong.' If everyone is eating it, I want to know why."

"Bizarre Foods" is now in its fourth season. How many countries have you visited?

"Ohmygosh. Gazillions. I'm up to a very high number. With the shows that haven't aired yet, I've done somewhere in the neighborhood of 80 or 85 shows, 40 or 50 of them in unique countries."

Does one food you discovered in your travels stand out as your best discovery?

"So many. I don't know if anyone else has ever gone lungfish fishing with people in central Uganda. Or foraging for giraffe beetles. Or had giant invertebrate sea squirts that come up from the depths of the Pacific Ocean. There are so many unique foods that I've never heard of anyone else stumbling across. Maybe they have, but I've never heard of it."

Do you ever try to recreate a bizarre meal at home?

"Oh sure, all the time. But it's ingredient driven. My show's not "Fear Factor." I have learned things. I adore goat, and now that there's goat commonly available here in the United States I've been able to roast whole goats. A lot of small game birds and all that."

And does your family go for that?

"Sure."

You've traveled to a lot of places most of us will only read about in National Geographic. Which is your favorite?

"It's always the place that I just got back from. I just adore Africa. I think it's a very special place. It would be easy to pick some places in Southeast Asia or the Pacific islands, but there's something about Africa that's very very mystical and empowering to me. I was in Madagascar in a place called Morandava spending time with people who paddle 25 miles out the sea to get food for their families."

Which place is your least favorite?

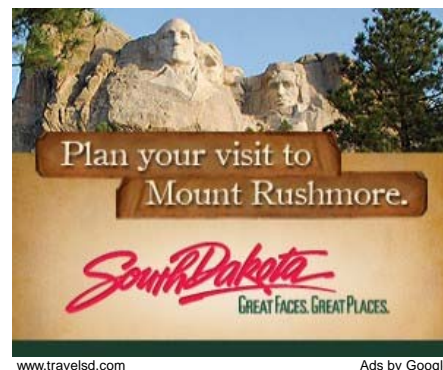
"I've had some very bad nights, but never a bad trip. One of the most thrilling places I've visited in my life is Mongolia, but Ulan Bator, the capital, is a very difficult place to live in."

You're very polite and gracious with the locals you encounter on your show, even when you're eating their fire-roasted, uncleaned wild boar intestine delicacy. How do you keep from gagging and spitting out some of the more vile foods?

"I don't believe you travel 5,000 miles to someone whose been waiting for you -- sometimes for months -- and they put half their net worth into a pot for you, just to be rude to them. I was in a town in Belize where they live in ramshackle buildings." A family with only three pigs and six roosters "killed a pig and a rooster to cook for me. I wouldn't call the food very good or even very inspired. And there was this teeny little grandma standing next to me, beaming with pride. So I would compliment her on her earrings. When somebody's being that kind and has put that much effort into it, why would I take a pot shot at him?"

Does anything make you gag?

"Bad fruit is absolutely the worst. No one believes me, but there are some fruits that smell and reek of dead bodies that some people are just addicted to. I had



this aloe tonic in Equador that had six feet of aloe threads in it, and I realized half was in my stomach and the other half was still in my glass. It was just vile. That stuff to me is always worse than drinking animal blood."

Have you ever gotten ill, contracted parasites, etc., while filming an episode?

"No. I wish I could. I could loose 30 or 40 pounds, so I'm dying for a parasitic event, but it just hasn't happened."

Is there anything you would refuse to eat?

A human being. I won't do cannibalism. And I won't do endangered species."

How much time do you spend away from your Minnesota home?

"About 30 weeks a year."

Do you ever get to travel for leisure? Or do you stay home when you're done?

"I try to. Usually when I'm done, I'm home. But we have a nice Christmas trip planned to Hawaii. Can't wait."

What did you eat for breakfast this morning?

"I had a half a scrambled egg-and-cheese quesadilla with my son, a mango-orange smoothie and half a clementine. And a cup of coffee."

I've seen you sample foods that even many of the locals don't eat, but they're revered for their health properties or some other reasons. Have you discovered any bizarre foods on Long Island that we might not be aware of?

"Oh gosh, yeah. When I was little, we would catch eels out at Halsey's Marina in East Hampton . . . We'd go, and eels would be slithering around, little puffer fish, very local foods. When I was training in France, no one knew how to butcher an eel. . . I learned how to do that from the kids in the neighborhood whose dads were fishermen. Now, sadly, I don't even think local eel is eaten anymore out there. We used to march over the dune on Georgica Beach and we'd throw a bluefish head on a string into the water and slowly drag it back covered with crabs."

Reader Olivia Rosa of Greenvale asks: "If you had to go back to one place to get one specific bizarre food, which would it be?"

In parts of Vietnam, they deep fry baby birds, baby ducklings, chickies, baby sparrows. They pluck them, they gut them, they toss them with a little bit of soy sauce and rice wine, and deep fry them. Then you hold them by the beaks and eat them whole, the bones are soft. They're absolutely, agonizingly, breathtakingly delicious.

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