



## ANDREW ZIMMERN **FEAR NO FOOD**

*The vocabulary of a seasoned cigar smoker's well-educated palate draws from a range of culinary experiences. Fearless Andrew Zimmern may have the most unique frame of reference of any cigar taster, anywhere. → By Evan Dashevsky*

**A**ndrew Zimmern gets asked lots of questions about his digestive tract. While surely appreciative of the public's concern, the host of the Travel Channel's wildly popular show *Bizarre Foods* is proud to set the record straight on the indomitability of his innards. "I've never once gotten sick from the food I've eaten. I'm as shocked as anybody else," says television's most fearless gourmand while on the way to a comparatively unexotic shoot in California. "I think if hot food is kept hot, and cold food cold, it doesn't matter if it's rotting or whatever. If someone's grandma has tended to it, then it's probably good to eat."



And eating is something this chef and food writer knows something about. As the host of *Bizarre Foods*, Zimmern travels to locations around the globe, both industrialized and less-so, on a quest to document the varied colors of the edible rainbow. These culinary escapades have included sampling all manner of unusual delicacies, from maggot-infested cheese in Nicaragua, to rotting shark meat in Iceland, to deer penis stew in Singapore (which for the record tastes "woody" and "chewy"). Cuisine that, to the average American, could really only be described as, well, bizarre.



**“I’ve eaten eight-week old rotted fish, I’ve eaten six-month old rotten seal fat...rotting and fermenting foods are some of the best in the world: think sauerkraut, pickles, and cheese.”**



The show takes the concept of the off-the-beaten-path travelogue to dazzling, occasionally gag-worthy new heights. And, to be sure, *Bizarre* has a freak show element (a.k.a. great TV), but it’s much more than a mere *Jackass* for foodies. The intrepid host is just as interested in the cultures and people he visits as he is in the alien foods they eat.

As a rule, Zimmern will sample any kind of food that he comes across. Long-time viewers of the show understand that if he genuinely enjoys some exotic form of chow, he generously rains praise upon the local chef utilizing all his food-critic powers of laser detail. Of course, there are also the *other* times. When Zimmern is less enthusiastic about what he just put in his mouth, he politely smiles to the local merchant and says something along the lines of “well that is really interesting.”

The only foods Zimmern won’t try out of hand are human flesh or dog (and walnuts, he does not like walnuts). In the course of filming the show, he rarely declines to dine on camera. One rare pass took place in front of a spare chicken parts vendor in a Philippine street market.

“That’s a different issue,” he explains. “I’ve eaten eight-week old rotted fish, I’ve eaten six-month old rotten seal fat. You know, rotting and fermenting foods are some of the best in the world: think sauerkraut, pickles, and cheese. Cheese is

just exercising controlled spoilage. However, as a food expert I can tell you that a blood- and feces-filled lower intestinal tract of old roosters left to dry in the sun and then handed to you by someone who has sketchy ideas about hygiene—that’s a trip to the hospital in waiting. Even the folks in that country who already have the local flora and fauna in their bellies would be well advised not to eat it.”

Aside from visiting restaurants and food markets, the show makes a point to venture away from tourist centers to dine with local families and sample some genuine regional fare. The food is usually prepared completely from scratch, often entirely by the hands of a family matriarch. Some of the families profiled live in extreme poverty, the depths of which are rarely found in the U.S. (all families featured on the show are, of course, compensated for their time and work). It might seem somewhat detached to emphasize cuisine in circumstances like this, where the goal is just as often sustenance as it is flavor. But these are also the moments when the show turns from a mysterious food circus into a window on culture.

“I’m proud that we’ve never ginned up a situation. We’ve never gone to a family that has the right-looking grass hut and brought them some oddball food and said ‘can you cook this?’ We’re about representing culture as we find it on the ground

and interpreting it thorough food.” Zimmern explains what separates *Bizarre Foods* from other shows’ attempts at Reality TV, where the emphasis is too often placed on the latter than the former. “When we went to Belize, for example, we met with a family who lived in the most despair-ridden conditions than any other family we’ve ever shared a meal with. There were about 10 adults and 18 kids in this family, and they were sleeping eight people to a room. There was no electricity, no running water. All they owned were two pigs and 10 chickens, but they insisted on making this dish with chicken and some pork tamales. So they killed two of their chickens and one of their hogs for us. Now I will tell you, meeting these people whose net worth was smaller than some items of clothes the crew and I were wearing was a very humbling experience. And when they take half of their net worth and put it on a table for you, it almost brings tears to your eyes just to think of that kind of generosity. Those are the moments that I remember and it’s those experiences that are so fantastic.”

Meanwhile, on the polar opposite side of the socioeconomic spectrum from rural Belize lies the cosmopolitan beacon of Manhattan’s posh Upper East Side. It’s here where Zimmern claims his roots as a self-described “private school elitist.” He attended Dalton, one of the country’s premiere prep

schools, and began his culinary education at the age of 14 working at top area restaurants. “I begged my parents to let me work in restaurants over the summer,” he says of his early embarking on a career in food. “At first I worked nights washing dishes and peeling vegetables in local restaurants out in East Hampton. Eventually, I started working in the winters one night a week back in NYC just to learn about the business.”

On the surface, what was a smooth path also included some of the pitfalls of privileged life. Growing up in 1970s New York, Zimmern was exposed to the excesses of that indulgent era. “I was at all the opening nights for all the big nightclubs like Studio 54 and Xenon—all of that stuff,” he explains of his formative years. “Sometimes I’d bump into my teachers and my parents’ friends—oftentimes in the bathroom. And it was just a different time and place. Everything was treated with a very cavalier attitude. Way too cavalier for my taste now.”

After graduating from Vassar College, Zimmern continued working at various restaurants, but also started getting heavier into drugs. By the age of 30 he ended up “cratering his life” and spent a year living on the streets and supporting his out-of-control habit by snatching purses from outdoor cafes. Finally, he ended up leaving NYC to enter rehab in the less temptation-laden land of Minnesota for his “umpteenth



“I love being able to enjoy a cigar for a long walk after a day shooting at some beautiful location...Enjoying a cigar out there is one of the great treats for a smoker.”



attempt at sobriety.” But this time, he was able to maintain a substance-free life and start the process of rebuilding.

After getting clean, Zimmern got back into the restaurant business as well as becoming a food writer and critic for several local and national publications (next time you’re on a Delta flight, check out the masthead on the in-flight *Sky* magazine where you will find Zimmern listed as a contributing editor). His media and culinary background eventually led to his successful bid on *Bizarre Foods* which garnered him a prestigious James Beard Award for “Outstanding Food Personality” this past year.

Like many true gourmands, Zimmern has an appreciation for the smokeable art of cigars. People often talk of cigars in terms of recognizable tastes, noting hints of pepper highlights and sweet aftertastes or comparing a strong power smoke to a juicy piece of steak. And there’s a reason. “Cigars have fantastic flavor and mouth-feel,” he explains. And like food, cigars come with their own rituals and habits. “I think a good cigar is just about the greatest way to end an evening that I can imagine. I love being able to enjoy a cigar for a long walk after a day shooting at some beautiful location. Like being able to stroll through the Kalahari desert at night accompanied by some Bushmen with spears, or while walking around the streets of

Mongolia, or in any of the places I’ve been to. Enjoying a cigar out there is one of the great treats for a smoker.”

As far as a favorite cigar, Zimmern sets the bar high for quality brands. “I go on the road a lot, so the world is my oyster in terms of cigar choice. I love the Avo, I love the Fuente Fuente, I love [Fuente’s] Hemingway Short Story—those are great cigars. But mostly I’m lucky enough to be buying cigars in a lot of countries where great Cuban cigars are available. I’m hooked on the Partagas Series D.”

While in Cuba doing a shoot for *Bizarre Foods*, Zimmern’s love for off-the-beaten-path travel led him to some of the world’s most exclusive cigars. So exclusive they’re not available in any store and very few even know of their existence. While filming a story about his beloved Cuban Partagas cigars, he and his crew paid a visit to the tobacco fields of the Viñales region. “So, I’m talking with the growers and I’m going on about how great this Partagas cigar from the factory was. And they were like ‘that’s good, but that’s not even close to being the best cigar.’ And he goes on to explain ‘well, we grow the stuff, we cure the stuff, we age the stuff and then we send it to the factory. But do you really think we’d give them all of the best tobacco?’ So, they take me into one of the barns and they start rolling these *cornettos*. You know, these big, sort of open on one end big wide

with a pointy tip. They hand roll it very coarsely, stuffing pulled tobacco into this big leaf wrapper and not using any molds. And we smoked it in rocking chairs in the shade of a tree looking over the tobacco fields. And it was not even close. It was the best cigar I ever dreamed of. And they just looked at me and smiled and said ‘yeah, we just keep it here in the barn for us, this is the really good stuff’ And I asked ‘So, I’ll never be able to have this again, will I?’ And they said “no.”

While that dream cigar may never meet Zimmern’s lips again, his mouth has plenty to keep it busy. He’s currently filming new episodes of *Bizarre Foods*, which keeps him on the road for about 30 weeks out of the year. And when he’s home, he spends time with his five-year-old son, Noah, who Zimmern proudly boasts is, like his dad, “not a picky eater.” And for you parents trying to get your kids to try more foods than McDonald’s and Nestle have to offer, Zimmern gives this advice: “kids are way more resilient than we give them credit for and they are way more curious than we give them credit for. I think what happens is that parents end up providing a very narrow set of food choices because parents are all time-poor. Look at America now, we’re time-poor, we’re cash-poor, and we place no value on shopping and cooking food together. Now, in our house we have a conversation every night ‘what should we

have for dinner tomorrow?’ We involve our son in that food decision. He’s involved in the choice and that works.”

Few people find a job that is the perfect fit, but it seems like Zimmern may be one of those fortunate outliers. He has crafted a successful show that connects with viewers as he explores the extent of his appetite and wanderlust on the Travel Channel’s dime. While few would include eating tarantulas and assorted animal viscera a perk, for a student of the world with an insatiable curiosity, it’s just another great day on the job.

Compared to many of the people Zimmern visits on his show, his viewers live in relative prosperity. While we don’t enjoy the blank check from a major basic cable outlet that he does, we all have the means to expand our gastronomic horizons in some small way, sampling some fare at that farmer’s market down the way or trying that new ethnic restaurant across town. But a lot of us never will. We go to the same lunch counter and microwave up the same TV dinner. And yet, scores of timid eaters happily tune into *Bizarre Foods* to vicariously live through Zimmern’s stomach. Sometimes the unfamiliar fare looks amazing, oftentimes it’s downright unappetizing. But the allure of the exotic is always captivating. We all have the means to step out of our culinary comfort zone, but so many make the decision not to.

And in the end, isn’t that just kind of bizarre?

