

NEWS

Star power on menu as 'Bizarre Foods' hits Lowell

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LOWELL — Andrew Zimmern wasted little time yesterday putting Simply Khmer to the test.

After sitting down at a table reserved for him in the middle of the Cambodian eatery shortly after 4 p.m., the host of the Travel Channel's Bizarre Foods ordered hot wings, their signature dish.

A waitress carefully monitored her steps as she walked the chicken wings, covered in a glistening, gold sauce, to the hungry TV star and his companion for the meal, Duey Kol, a local National Park ranger.

The assembled crowd in the Lincoln Street restaurant, made up of visitors and restaurant employees of all ages, fell silent when Zimmern grabbed a wing off the plate and lifted it to his mouth.

When a smile emerged on Zimmern's face after he finished munching on the wing, the restaurant's staff also broke out in smiles. They realized a man who makes a living eating foods many people would never contemplate trying, like deep-fried tarantulas and cow testicles, was satisfied with feasting on one of the world's most ubiquitous foods.

Zimmern then put a finger to one of the wings to scoop up the sauce and licked his finger. He could be seen mouthing the word "scrumptious."

"It was like watching him on TV, but much, much better because he was right there," said Vearsna Khath, a waiter. "You can't get that on Comcast."

Some in the audience were surprised Zimmern began his eating odyssey with chicken wings, but the culinary explorer said his trip to the Mill City was about finding a place during his filming of a Greater Boston-focused episode that would remind him of the scrumptious food he has had when visiting Cambodia. He said he was also searching for cultural enclaves outside of Boston.

Simply Khmer exceeded his expectations in every respect, he said.

"The minute I walked in, I could smell and see the authenticity of the place," he said in an interview after the restaurant shoot. "If you want to get something you would find in Cambodia, you should come here."

After the wings, Zimmern ordered the tuk praw-hok porh ho, which is a beef salad with beef tripe. Zimmern said he would "put that dish up against any in its genre."

The culinary explorer later devoured rice porridge with pork intestines, which he called "one of the best dishes he has had." He also munched on the "extreme shrimp," shrimp without the heads taken off, accompanied by spicy garlic sauce, and he sampled a



Zimmern summed up the food and his dining experience as “honest, authentic and fantastic.”

Restaurant co-owner Denise Ban was impressed that Zimmern did not stick to the dishes his crew recommended for him.

“He went through the menu and knew exactly what he wanted,” she said. “He was just as adventurous as he was on television. It was perfect.”

The culinary celebrity’s appearance should help boost business at Simply Khmer, which has only been open for a little over a year, said Ban, who owns the restaurant with Sambath Neang. Neang prepared the food for Zimmern.

The owners, their family and all the employees swarmed Zimmern when the shoot wrapped, and he happily obliged all photo requests. He was also presented with a Simply Khmer T-shirt.

Zimmern then left the adoring group at the restaurant for the Sou family home in the Highlands neighborhood. He was expected to cook with the family late last night and have a Cambodian family meal with them.

The segments of the show filmed yesterday are not guaranteed to appear on the Greater Boston-focused episode of Bizarre Foods that will air in February. However, LZ Nunn, executive director of the Cultural Organization of Lowell, said she thinks the Mill City made quite the impression on Zimmern.

“On the website for the show, it highlights his passion for cultural heritage, and he really got to see that today and a snapshot of what makes Lowell Lowell,” she said. “I think we have a great chance of making it on.”

But by late afternoon, some at Simply Khmer were so excited about how the shoot went, they were not so much focused on whether the segment would air, but instead were already wondering which celebrity might follow in Zimmern’s footsteps.

“Maybe we can get Anthony Bourdain here next,” joked Kea Ban, a sister of Denise Ban.



Lyle Moran

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