Culinary Explorer with an Iron Stomach

By Erik Lief — July 13, 2018

For more than a decade now Andrew Zimmern has crisscrossed the world, and then some, eating some of the craziest things you can imagine.

The host of Bizarre Foods on the Travel Channel has consumed silk worms and bull penis in Vietnam (2007) to goat organs in Ethiopia (2008) to wildebeest eyeballs in Namibia (2011) and everything in between. Adventurous, you could say that safely. But that doesn't even begin to describe this globetrotting culinary explorer whose unafraid of any potential digestive danger that may soon cross his lips.

Given that Zimmern has been nearly everywhere since he began hosting the popular show in 2007 and has conceivably tasted nearly every regional creation ever to land on a plate, the main question is this: Has he ever gotten terribly ill?

"No, I've never gotten sick on a trip. It's not like I'm doing some safe dieting!," Zimmern said, during an interview around the time he was sampling Ethiopian goat innards. "I'm in some of the most bacteriologically compromised places, eating some of the most pathogenically different foods for a Westerner."
“When I was in Africa,” he continued, “they gave me this honey water to drink in Tanzania when I was living with the Masai, and I drank it, and two days later, one of my cameramen asked me, ‘Do you realize that you drank a whole cup of, like, raw, unfiltered water that was brown in color?’ I didn’t even realize that I’d done it,” explained Zimmern, a four-time winner of the James Beard Award. “It was kind of wild. But I had no side effects! But, no, I’ve had no ‘digestive issues.’ [laughs] And I keep waiting for it to happen! Not because I want it to, but it’s just like I’m rolling the dice, you know?”

The program's new season just debuted last week, and thus far Zimmern's culinary curiosity has taken him from a retracing of the trails of the Pony Express in the U.S. to the path of William Wallace in Scotland, and next to Hawaii. So there’s no telling what he’s going to try.

There's also no telling how Zimmern has lasted these so many years eating almost anything that's been offered to him – without suffering a career-threatening bodily reaction. While it's anyone's guess, the 57-year-old gastronomic guru has grown to believe that his digestive system is extremely adaptable.

"I think what it is, is that over time, you either develop antibodies for some of this stuff or you don’t," Zimmern told an interviewer. "Because I’ve eaten food and had my [TV] crew try things, and then they have an upset stomach for awhile and I don’t."

To our experts, that explanation seems plausible.

"People who live in areas with dirty water don't get sick because their bodies are already accustomed to it," says Alex Berezow, Senior Fellow of Biomedical Science for the American Council on Science and Health, who holds a Ph.D. in microbiology. "So, yes, it's quite possible Andrew Zimmern has the world's most diverse stock of antibodies."

However, Dr. Josh Bloom, ACSH's Director of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, is more skeptical of Zimmern's talented tummy.

"He may or may not have a hyped-up immune system," Dr. Bloom said. "But I can think of one experiment that would answer that question: Could he eat kale and keep it down?"