

## **Life Depends on the Liver**

*What animals dream of I do not know. A proverb, for which I am indebted to one of my pupils, professes to tell us, for it asks the question: What does the goose dream of?" and answers: "Of maize. . ." The whole theory that the dream is a fulfilment of a wish is contained in these two sentences. Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams*

RECENTLY a journalist phoned and said he had been given my name by the Guild of Food Writers as someone who might be prepared to speak on behalf of *paté de foie gras*. He must be scraping the bottom of the terrine, I thought.

"I'm having a hard time," he went on, confirming my suspicions. "I can't find anyone who will speak in favour of it."

"Who are you writing for?" (Bet it's an animal rights publication.)

"My wife is writing a paper to present to the EU on behalf of an organisation devoted to animal welfare." (Uh huh.) "It'll be about two dozen A4 pages. We want to do away with mechanised forced feeding at the very least, but we're going to put both sides. . . We're not extremists," he added reassuringly. "We don't go about opening cages."

Only cans of worms. Here was I, the Food Commission's librarian, being asked to argue the case for force-feeding helpless geese. Next it'll be a Sunday feature on consuming live monkey brains. . .

Best to have a starting point. As it happened, I'd written something relevant last fall after visiting a goose farm in the Perigord. I suggested that I e-mail it to him and we take off from there. Here's what I sent him:

*Our last visit was one I'd been trying to forget. We had been promised a demonstration of forced feeding, the traditional method of producing enormous goose livers for foie gras. I've never particularly cared for geese. They seem not only stupid, like chickens, but irascible, even bellicose. But that's an anthropomorphic prejudice and no justification for torturing them. These geese seemed curious, even friendly. A flock of about twenty waddled over to the fence to investigate. They probably wanted to be fed. Don't be impatient, I thought; before long you'll get plenty of that. . .*

*We were taken inside a large barn that contained a long row of about twenty pens, each perhaps three meters long by a meter wide, holding about a dozen geese, with room to stretch their wings and strut a bit. On a long beam overhead was a travelling hopper and a funnel, with a motor-driven agitator. Guy Meynard, our host, sat down on a stool in the nearest pen, with all the geese to one side of him. One by one he pulled them across, inserted the long funnel down their necks, poured in a scoop of mixed grains, and turned on the motor. He stroked each neck, the grain disappeared in a few seconds and he took the next goose. It was all over in a couple of minutes. I looked in vain for signs of terror or even discomfort. Except for a few random squawks, the whole barn was quiet. The geese were snow-white; nowhere was there a tell-tale spot of blood that would indicate fighting or self-mutilation. It was animal husbandry as meticulous as any I'd ever witnessed. I'd eat goose liver from that farm with a clearer conscience than if I were sitting down to a plate of carrots grown by exploited Third World labourers. (From "Forward to the Past: Food Production in the Perigord")*

IN spite of the high standards of the best poultrymen, *foie gras* remains the gourmet's shameful addiction. How do you justify giving a goose a sick liver so that you can spread it on a slice of toast? In the beginning, the birds themselves were responsible. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, in her monumental *History of Food*, tells us that the ancient Egyptians, having caught and eaten wild geese that had stuffed themselves for their long seasonal migrations, went gaga over their distended livers and tried it on domestic fowl. The latter weren't going anywhere, so nature had to be supplemented by artifice, and techniques were evolved to cram the extra food down their ungrateful throats.

According to Waverley Root, the Romans produced it more humanely (though *Larousse Gastronomique* denies this). They did not force-feed, he says, but immersed the quivering organ of the freshly slaughtered goose in a bowl of milk (or milk and honey)—a sort of posthumous genetic engineering by which the liver absorbed the butter fat and increased in size. The Roman goose could thus live a happy normal life in blissful ignorance and, when the fateful moment came, his remains would be fit for more than *confit*, which is all the force-fed bird is good for. But somewhere along the way there must have been a greedy goose who ate himself into an early grave. His owner, noting the greatly increased size and succulence of the liver, decided to give the rest of his flock every encouragement. And that's the way it's been done ever since.

ALONG with caviar, lobster tails, dover sole, *fillet mignon* and truffles, *foie gras* falls into that select category of foods especially favoured by the rich. They have in common the fact that they are all conspicuously expensive, easy to eat, and neutrally flavoured so as to combine readily with a variety of sauces—either *gastronomique* or *minceur*, depending on the diner's girth and vanity. Compared with the robust, even aggressive textures and flavours of traditional peasant foods, they are fare for invalids and do not beckon onward to adventure. By contrast, the great *New Yorker* essayist A.J. Liebling tells of the endless gastronomic research he had to carry out in Paris in order to make the most of a small irregular income. He concludes with the sage observation:

*A man who is rich in his adolescence is almost doomed to be a dilettante at table. This is not because all millionaires are stupid, but because they are not impelled to experiment. In learning to eat, as in psychoanalysis, the customer, in order to profit, must be conscious of the cost.*

ASIDE from these superficial attributes, what is it that elevates *foie gras* into the select company of the unforgettable? The simple fact is that, if you like seductively rich and complex flavours which linger caressingly in the mouth long after their substance has passed down the gullet, impelling you to inhale gently so as to maximise and prolong the sensation—in short, if you have the soul of a gourmet—you will prize *foie gras* along with the fugues of Bach, the sonnets of Shakespeare, the self-portraits of Rembrandt, and other profound stimuli too intimate to mention.

The ultimate experience is not the *paté*, which is merely a means of preservation, but rather the *foie gras* itself. Fresh strips of it, fried quickly but gently in butter and served instantly on hot toast, define the concept of unctuousness. Once you have had it, the sensation is its own defence.

Fortunately for the impecunious, ducks can be made to produce *foie gras de canard* which, because of its stronger flavor, some even prefer to its upmarket alternative. But more intensive farming methods then become feasible; for ducks, unlike geese, will survive battery cages. From there it's been downhill all the way. The accelerating demand for luxury, emanating from the exploding ranks of the criminally rich, has brought about the crude mechanisation of force-feeding techniques, with machinery that grabs the bird roughly by the neck and crams in the feed in a couple of seconds. As a result, the mortality rate has shot up to around twenty percent and the profits, for these vile operators, to astronomical levels. Even the ethically indifferent gourmet must shudder: the flesh of an unhappy animal is always inferior.

As usual, science is about to introduce a moral quandry. Experiments have been going on at the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique in which, by electro-chemical stimulation, geese and ducks can be made instantly bulimic, eating everything that is put in front of them. Within a few days they reach a weight which would take a month of forced feeding. It's the archetypal capitalist metaphor: they are bred not only to be eaten, but to revel in their own sacrifice. The next step is the "Dish of the Day", the rotund bovine/anthropomorphic creature in Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which is given the powers of reason and speech in order to sell itself to the prospective diner.

IN the light of such widespread and accelerating abuse, how can one still defend the consumption of *foie gras*? Food production, particularly on a massive scale, is not a comfortable topic. The perpetuation of life on earth is a process of mutual evisceration. Added to the indifference of nature is the cruelty of mankind: in the industrial food market there's hardly a vegetable—let alone a piece of meat, a glass of milk, or an egg—that we could face with a clear conscience if we were shown the conditions under which it was produced. We would then have to consider not only the animal suffering caused by factory-style meat, dairy and poultry production, but also the grinding poverty in which the tenders and harvesters of crops are often forced to work and live—not only in the Third World countries that grow a steadily increasing proportion of our produce, but even under our very noses.

If you are a vegetarian or a vegan on humanitarian grounds, then you must buy organic produce, which has probably been grown and harvested by ethical methods. But if world demand continues to escalate, it will also be grown by unscrupulous speculators, who will obviate herbicides by pulling the weeds up one at a time with expendable armies of Third World slave labourers. So if you are really fastidious about such matters, you will ultimately have to grow your own—and pray that the moment never arrives when a scientist records the agony of a carrot yanked screaming from the soil.

In the end, what you put into your mouth depends on what you can live with. It is impossible to be govered simultaneously by one's palate and one's conscience, and so I shall continue to delight occasionally in those problematical foods which date from bygone eras. This is the age of the stir-fry. Like the ponderous, labour-intensive *cassoulet*, *foie gras* is a gastronomic anachronism which, if it did not already exist, would probably not be invented.

©1999 John Whiting