

There's pleasure sure in being mad which none but madmen know

Long before the days of “conservation”, the ingenuity of the farmer's wife served as a model for good business practice. “Nothing is wasted but the squeal!” claimed one hog producer, whose ultimate products ranged from fertilizer to leather to hairbrushes to liniment.

The one thing they didn't do with their pigs was feed them to each other. A bit of unscheduled cannibalism might take place, but it wasn't positively encouraged: pigs made expensive pig feed. “Dog eat dog” is a great capitalist metaphor, but you'd never find a prize-winning kennel putting it into practice.

Since hungry non-human animals weren't allowed in the kitchen, the question didn't arise. We had a monopoly on other species' liver, kidneys, heart, skin, tripe, brains and marrow, and used the intestines for sausage casings. (The good butchers of Comdom in Gascony even discovered an analogous anatomical utilization.) The leftovers, if any, were boiled up for stock. Everything had its own flavor; and Adam tasted it, and it was good.

Then Henry Ford invented the assembly line. Simplicity and interchangeability became the gastronomic order of the day; everything must go into the pot and be boiled up together. Leftover parts on the floor or off the end of the conveyer belt? Take them back to the top and run them through again.

Mother Nature didn't like it. She started dropping little hints: new diseases of a particularly unpleasant sort which affected the mind as well as the body. But since the food industrialists were already crazed with greed, they didn't notice until people as well as animals started keeling over. The mega-chefs' apprentices in the Parliamentary kitchens sat on the lid for as long as they could, until the pot boiled over and everyone started falling about on the slippery floor.

Even the punters began to get frightened; consumption dipped alarmingly. The price of beef plummeted and the British housewife responded by taking wise precautionary measures, such as buying the cheap beef to freeze until the panic blew over.

But there were those who refused to be moved by scare mongering. Their ancestors had devoured offal since the dawn of history and a few mad cows who thought they were MPs were not going to make them change the habits of a lifetime. Their *sanctum sanctorum* in London is St. John's Restaurant, a shrine dedicated to holistic carnivorousness. No part of an animal is too *recherché* to be the object of meticulous culinary attention.

But the ax has finally fallen, not only on the ingredients but on the menu. *The* [London] *Guardian* reports that

Regrettably, sheep's brains are off at St. John's restaurant in Clerkenwell, near London's Smithfield meat market, where they specialise in “nose to tail eating”. Fergus Henderson, chef and partner, got a call on Monday night from a friend who told him about the BSE scare in sheep.

“Deep fried, pan-fried on toast -- they're delicious,” said Mr. Henderson. “But not for a while now.”

They have gone the way of calves' brains and other delicacies from the less mentionable parts of animals, not just because of the fears of customers but because “you lose confidence in what you are cooking”.

There neither is nor was anything wrong with the animal parts cooked in their kitchen, of course. And he is keen to point to his fish and vegetable dishes alongside the house specialties.

But Mr. Henderson is a holistic chef. He wants to eat animals' insides as well as outsides. [Outsides? Sic, with an optional k.]

Yesterday there was pot roast kid [in its British, not American sense] on the menu and dried, salted pig's liver.

The roast bone marrow was particularly popular, extracted by the customer with a spoon from Dutch veal bones and eaten with toast. Architect Piers Gough was one who enjoyed it and without sparing a thought for BSE.

“When it mattered was 10 years ago,” he said. “I don't care now. If anybody's going to go, it's me. I have a passion for offal.”

For those of us who are not fatalists, there's no answer except vegetarianism; get the hogs off our backs and vice versa. But what's the word from our official government food scientists? Carrots are now so impregnated with pesticides that we are advised not just to scrub them but to remove the peel and a generous hunk of the top, which is where the better part of the nourishment also lies.

Better grow your own. As Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley has been showing and telling us for years, there's nothing like the flavor and nourishment of really fresh, locally produced vegetables. It's a glorious experience--in California. Here in London the weekly boxes you can order from cooperatives of organic farmers come packed in winter with root vegetables plus a few dour members of the cabbage family. Period. Fancy a lettuce? Better travel.

Another thing: if the patch your organic vegetables come from lies too close to a highway, or to another farmer who sprays, your pristine produce may be loaded with lead and second-hand pesticides--the gastronomic equivalent of passive smoking.

As Brillat-Savarin so wisely said, “You are what you eat” (in quantity, alas, as well as quality). But aside from obesity, most of the diet-related diseases take so long to manifest themselves that before I start frothing at the mouth, I'll have died of superannuation. Please pass the sheep's brains.

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