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Foie Gras

As Seen from Southwest France

IT IS STRANGE THAT the current ethical furor in the United States over the force-feeding of ducks and geese has surfaced after perhaps five thousand years, during which the practice was never publicly questioned. Perhaps this is because *foie gras*, like chicken, salmon, and other once-luxury foods, is nowadays within the reach of so many more pockets, and manufacture has become largely industrialized and taken over by big business. The public has thus been made more aware of a so-called ethical problem.

There is no doubt about the antiquity of the process of force-feeding birds. It is said that the ancient Egyptians noticed that many migrating geese and ducks “force-feed” themselves in the wild before migration, since they need to store fat in their livers to produce sufficient energy to cover the long flights they have to make, some often traveling nonstop for twelve hours. A wild duck, for instance, can double its weight by stocking fat in its liver. Birds arriving from northern climes had enlarged livers, and it was this observation that led the ancients to the idea of force-feeding. When or where it started can never be proved, but certainly, there still exist Egyptian frescoes in burial chambers dating from 2500 B.C. that illustrate the practice. The sepulcher of Ti at Saqqarah is particularly interesting for its depiction of servants preparing the feed, possibly using roasted and soaked grain and then feeding each goose in much the same manner as is practiced today. Other ancient Egyptian examples of frescoes of flocks of geese can be found in the Cairo Museum, the British Museum, and the Louvre in Paris.

The goose is well represented by a fine Greek sculpture from the third century B.C., also in the Louvre, of the bird held by a child. In Roman times geese were prized for their feathers, for their fat—both for culinary and cosmetic use—but above all for their livers. At that time, according to Pliny, they were fed on figs (*ficus*), which led to the use of the word *ficatum* or *figatum* to denote a goose liver fattened with figs, hence the later Italian word *fegato*, Spanish *higado*, Provençal and Catalan *fetge*, and French *foie*.

But the fall of the Roman Empire seems also to have led to a fall in the fashion for fattening birds, although the tradition was continued by the Jews in the Middle East. For them it was the means of having goose or duck fat for cooking, since pork fat was forbidden for religious reasons, and olive or sesame oil was difficult to find. The Jews who then migrated into eastern Europe took the tradition with them, and moving westwards, eventually founded a strong local production in Alsace, which remains there to this day. Marx Rumpolt's *Ein New Kochbuch*, which appeared in Frankfurt in 1581, refers to “roasting the liver of a goose which the Jews from Bohemia had fattened, weighing a little over three pounds.” Nearly two centuries later, the governor of Alsace's cook, Jean-Pierre Clause, with his *Pâté à la Contades*, started a vogue for *foie gras* that reached the court at Versailles and has continued to delight gourmets ever since.

Goose or duck fat had already been used in cooking in most of southwestern France because the summers were too dry there for rearing cattle on a large scale, and butter or beef fat was not available. Neither was olive oil, because the cold winters could kill any olive trees.

The Southwest had always been one of the poorer areas of France. A lot of the land was unfarmable; steep terrains, poor pastures, and bad transport links with the rest of the country caused much poverty and a consequent rarity of meat and dairy products. Properties were not large, little more than small holdings, a result of family divisions over centuries. Farm implements were basic, and farm manure, the only fertilizer. The climate was also unpredictable, often producing famines, aggravated by the rigidity of the feudal system before the Revolution. In those days the right to hunt in the wild was confined to the nobility, and only they were allowed dovecots to house their pigeons.

Maize arrived in Europe from America, probably in the late fifteenth century, and it was found that the soil in many parts of the Southwest, particularly the Périgord, was particularly suited to growing it. Maize eventually became the



major foodstuff for all birds reared in the region—turkeys, geese, ducks, and chickens. It proved an excellent feed, adding to the flavor of the birds and, by providing a diet of starch, contributing to the growth of their livers. At the same time, the birds produced a large quantity of fat under their skin.

The goose reared in the Southwest is a mongrel variety of the grey goose (*Anser cinereus*) and the wild goose (*Anser sylvestris*), a bird recognized to produce a large liver when fattened. There are regional subvarieties—the Toulouse goose, those raised in the Gers, and those in Les Landes—each producing variations in liver size and shape. The goslings hatch in spring and are raised outdoors on a diet largely of grasses and weeds. Eating grass helps to strengthen the esophagus, an important factor at the time of their *gavage* (force-feeding). Birds do not chew their food, so they need a very elastic gullet to enable them to store a large volume before it can be digested in the stomach.

At six to seven months, the birds are given supplements of grains and flour to build up their flesh and generally prepare them for the final stage. They are then brought indoors, and the force-feeding begins, three times a day, for a period of four to five weeks.

In the old days the process of *gavage*, still practiced today in some of the farms in the Southwest, was very different from the modern industrial methods. The farmer's wife had to forcibly funnel the grains of maize down the bird's gullet, but today, even she will sometimes use a small, electrically powered feeder. Each bird must still be held during the feed, not in a cage but between the feeder's knees, while the bird stands on straw. Many experienced goose ladies maintain that they build up a calming and coaxing relationship with the bird, massaging the neck to help in the action and to check the state of the process. They say that proper care for the birds is essential to the quality of the end product and are amazed, as are most French country people, by allegations of cruelty.

The last forty years have seen a change as farmers have turned to rearing birds on a larger scale. They fatten ducks rather than geese because they require only two feeds a day, and the force-feeding process lasts two rather than four to five weeks. Several rearings and fattenings can thus be fit into a year. Through crossbreeding, varieties of duck have been produced that grow larger and heavier than normal. The male Barbary duck, for example, can average four and



Above: *The traditional feeding of ducks.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL STRANG

a half kilos (ten pounds) when fully grown. It is a fleshy bird but does not produce so much fat, so it is crossed with a female of a large variety, usually a Rouen or Peking, which does. The resultant hybrid is a Mulard. Like the geese, the ducks, when traditionally raised, live outside until they are six to seven months old. At the end of the bird's life, the liver will have doubled in weight. Allegations by *foie gras* prohibitionists that a fattened liver is ten times the size of a natural one are somewhat exaggerated. A fresh fattened goose liver can weigh up to eight hundred grams (about one and three-quarters pounds), whereas a duck's would be roughly half that. Apart from the weight, a goose liver can be recognized by its two round, thick lobes of about the same length. A duck liver is smaller and flatter,

and one of the lobes is clearly longer than the other. The colors vary according to their feed. The Périgord maize is golden, so it produces a good golden-colored liver, whereas the white maize from Les Landes gives a more pinkish white hue. Duck livers melt more easily than goose livers, so extra care must be taken when processing them. Duck livers have a stronger flavor than goose livers, too, but connoisseurs have no hesitation in preferring goose *foie gras*, which they say has more finesse and delicacy.

The fattening traditionally took place in winter during the weeks leading up to Christmas so that any liver for selling

could be taken to market, *le marché gras*, a dedicated duck and goose market always a special feature of the local market towns. A flock of geese or ducks that can be handled comfortably each day, particularly during the force-feeding, would be around ten to twelve birds, so the whole enterprise was very much an artisan's one. The local tradition was and still is that *foie gras* is eaten *en famille* on Christmas Day, rather than at the special New Year's Eve celebration with friends.

Before the invention of the Appert method of sterilization and of refrigeration, a means of conserving meats had to be found, and in the Southwest of France there emerged the process that they named *confit*, a term that was not found elsewhere but today has become commonplace and much abused. Pieces of duck, goose, chicken, or pork were salted prior to being immersed in a copper cauldron filled with their own fat. Then they were gently simmered in it over a wood fire until cooked. The pieces were then packed into earthenware jars, completely covered in fat, and stored in a cool place over winter. Not only does this conserve the meats, but the cooking and storing under fat adds to the flavor. Sometimes the livers were also prepared in the same way, although for the most part they were either sold raw at market as a means of covering the farmer's costs in raising his flock or, at the time of the birds' killing, were sliced into *escalopes* and then fried or grilled, to be eaten by the family as a special treat.

It is perhaps inaccurate to say that the farmer raised the flock, since in fact this, including the final daily force-feeding, was the province of the farmer's wife in a culture where each member of the family had allotted and exclusive tasks. The *basse-cour*, the area on the farm where any poultry and rabbits were kept, was her domain, and it was her responsibility to rear them, to prepare their feed and administer it. She could often be found foraging in the hedgerows for some special weed or grasses or looking for any eggs laid away. The principal use for a flock of geese or ducks was to provide protein and fat in the diet of her family during the winter months; the *foie gras* was an added bonus rather than the essential purpose. If the farm had, say, a dozen birds, most of the livers went to market because they were too valuable; they were affordable only by the wealthier bourgeoisie and provided valuable cash for the farmer's wife. Only the odd one or two *foies* would be kept for domestic consumption on very special occasions.

The flesh of the birds would be made into *confit*, with nothing wasted. A goose or duck could be divided into four, then the neck skin was stuffed with forcemeat to form a large sausage (*confit de cou farci*), the giblets and wings preserved separately (*confit d'abattis*), and the scraps of flesh

left on the carcass made into a soft *pâté* (*rillettes*). No wonder there is a local saying that every part of the duck was used except the quack. It is also important to note that these preparations were made only from the specially fattened birds and that even today the use of the word *confit* should not be applied to a conventionally reared duck or goose.

After World War II agriculture in the Southwest began to change. It became more difficult to make a living; younger members of families emigrated to the towns; and only large-scale, modernized farming qualified for any state subsidies. In order to receive these, farmers had to meet certain criteria, and the amalgamation of farms into larger units was encouraged. This was not always possible in the Southwest, where unsuitable land, unreliable climatic conditions, and small labor forces dictated what progress could be made. Even so, the units of cultivation became fewer and larger. In a village near to us, for example, there were forty or so farms in the 1960s; today, there are only four.

One economic solution was to specialize in the raising of larger flocks of geese and ducks, capitalizing on tradition and local expertise. Three principal areas of production emerged. The Périgord, with its center at Périgueux and also including Brive-la-Gaillarde just over the border into the Corrèze; Les Landes in the deep Southwest; and the adjacent county of Gers are today the best-known areas of production.

Forty years ago, when we first came to know the Southwest, *foie gras* was found only on the more expensive menus of the few starred restaurants. A local butcher had a sideline of excellent canned *pâtés*, but apart from that, we seldom ate it until a close French friend initiated us one Christmas into the whole process of preparing *confit* and *foie gras*. Later, we were to repeat this experience in the Périgord when we spent a weekend on a duck farm where the farmer's wife was running poultry-based cookery classes as a means of supplementing the family income. She was probably ahead of her time; she repeated the experiment very successfully doing lecture-tours in the States, until she was head-hunted to become the personal cook to the French president!

At the same time, smaller concerns, preserving their own or local produce on an artisanal scale, cropped up all over the Southwest. In 1989 four farmers' wives living around our local village of Najac in the county of Aveyron set up their own canning business, based on the flocks of ducks they had raised and fattened. They installed themselves on the local industrial estate and before long opened Les Quatre Villages in Najac, selling canned duck *pâtés* of various kinds. They now also have a mail-order business and take stalls at local markets.

This is only one example of the many small businesses now operating all over the region. Larger brands may be processing livers raised industrially or imported from other countries to meet an ever-increasing demand, but the smaller producers are still using local ingredients.

Another way out of the dilemma for small-scale farmers is that some offer camping facilities on their farm or *chambres d'hôtes* where visitors can stay as well as have meals at the farm. One farmer we know has built on tradition and what can be done locally in an imaginative and extremely successful way. Some twenty years ago, following a farming accident, Jacques Carles decided to specialize in rearing ducks. As this was traditionally woman's work, his neighbors thought he was mad. But being an enterprising character, he developed the idea. He converted part of his farm buildings into a workshop, which he calls his *atelier* and where he planned to transform his reared birds into canned products for sale from his farm or at the local market. Later, following some carefully cultivated media publicity, he decided to attract visitors to his farm, giving them a guided tour, including a demonstration of the force-feeding, followed by a tasting of his duck products and an optional lunch based on traditional duck recipes—"so that the people understood what was on their plate." Some twenty years on, he has become the fourth-biggest gastronomic attraction in the department of Aveyron (the caves at Roquefort being the biggest), and he draws twenty-five thousand visitors a year, giving tours and lunches five days a week during the season. It is largely a family concern, with Jacques and his niece cooking the lunches, although he now has ten paid employees working for him. He has tripled his production to four thousand birds a year, so nearly half of the force-feeding is now done externally by local ladies, all on a one-to-one basis and not by mechanical methods.

On a recent visit I discussed the question of force-feeding with Jacques. He explained that his is the traditional way. His birds are free to roam outside for the first six to seven months, feeding on grass, but as they grow, their feed is supplemented with maize and dried peas to give added protein. The birds lie in groups on straw for comfort when they are brought inside into sheds for the two-week *gavage*, and hygiene is of the strictest. Jacques grows his own maize and feeds the birds three hundred grams morning and night for fifteen days. According to him, if at the end of this period the birds were not killed but released back outside for several weeks, experiment has shown that their livers would return to normal. "So the so-called experts are talking nonsense when they say force-feeding is producing a disease, like cirrhosis, in the birds," he said. "The process is almost

natural to these birds. You can try with chickens, but it will not enlarge their livers, since chickens are not migratory so do not need the extra energy."

According to Jacques, industrial *gavage* is often done when the birds are but two months old, although at that age the bird has more skin than flesh and the carcass has not grown sufficiently to allow for the enlarged liver. If they are raised in cages, a practice he abhors, the birds have to lie on bars on the floor of the cage, which can produce marks on their stomachs. They are fed mechanically so that one thousand birds can be handled per hour; he, on the other hand, feeds only sixty birds an hour. Industrial production is a far cry from Jacques's way of doing things. While the last few days of the birds' life may be painful, his birds will have spent the rest of their existence gourmandizing on the best food-stuffs, living a life of luxury. Contrast this to the short, nasty lives spent by broiler chickens, packed into windowless sheds containing as many as thirty thousand birds, suffering as they do from painful heart, lung, and leg disorders, breast blisters, and hock burns from sitting on soiled bedding.

Small wonder, then, that the best French chefs and *charcutiers* will at least claim that they buy only from old-style growers. Buying from a smaller concern will always secure a better and more humanely produced product than will picking one of the countrywide brands. In the Southwest they have developed a system of certification of origin in which the farmers are obliged to obey strict regulations about the rearing and *gavage* of the birds. For all *foie gras* producers there are also government controls concerning content, manufacture, and expiration dates as well as standards of hygiene during production. There is also a statutory code of labeling, which helps the customer to determine the percentage of *foie gras* in a canned product.¹

Until the 1950s the agricultural population represented 50 percent of the rural population in France, but after that, as the country recovered from the devastating effects of World War II, agriculture changed. Modernization led to overproduction of pig and beef cattle, and European subsidies created grain mountains and wine lakes. The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of a countermovement, however, challenging the social effects of such modernization. A number of smaller farmers covering more than seventy counties grouped together to form the *Confédération Paysanne*. This organization was anxious to preserve good quality of flavor and healthy farming, supporting moves into organic farming and creating regulations similar to the *Appellations d'Origine Controlées* applied to wines and cheeses in order to protect products from imitations. This organization went on to draw up a ten-point charter, one point of which states:

Animals and vegetables of all kinds belong to the human heritage, and we have to preserve this bio-diversity. For historic reasons we do not have the right to end a part of history which has lasted for generations. Also for economic reasons, since some varieties and species are particularly adapted to our regions, we have a duty to pass on this bio-diversity to future generations.

One of the prime activists in this movement was a sheep farmer based in the Roquefort area of the Southwest, José Bové, and soon he and his colleagues were being consulted by the government on subjects of agricultural politics, such as reform of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, which was favoring the big boys in farming. It was Bové who led the symbolic public sacking of a McDonald's restaurant under construction not far from his farm. This was at the time of the European Economic Council's argument with the United States over Europe's refusal to import American hormone-raised cattle—which in turn led to the US ban on the import of Roquefort cheese.

The current situation in Chicago and California over banning the production and importation of *foie gras* is not unrelated to the situation Bové fought for. At the time he said he was not anti-American but that he and his colleagues stood for equity in world trade and for the preservation of biodiversity.

The action of the American animal rights groups in singling out all force-feeding of ducks is, to French thinking and mine, excessive. Maybe they are right to condemn on humanitarian grounds industrialized *foie gras* production as practiced in the States; their position that this is unnecessarily cruel may be quite tenable. But are they showing the same strength in condemning the raising of battery hens or veal calves or pigs in restricted pens? Are they perhaps wary of taking on targets that may be too big for them to dent? How many *foie gras* eaters are there in comparison to those

who eat chicken or beef every week? World demand for these foodstuffs has created a problem, with customers expecting to buy cheaply. *Foie gras* never used to be a cheap item: its production involved hard work by the farmer's wife, and yields were never large, so the customer had to pay. What needs to be addressed by activists is unnecessary cruelty, not the elimination of a whole product because of the bad standards of some producers. Surely, it should then be left to individual choice whether or not to eat *foie gras*. To say what people should be allowed or forbidden to eat negates freedom of choice and sets a very dangerous precedent. It could also, in the case of *foie gras*, have the effect of severely damaging the whole culture and economy of a part of France, over which foreign do-gooders, however well intentioned, have no right to legislate. ☹

NOTE

1. One of the reasons why the rearing of ducks has largely replaced that of geese is the popularity of the duck breast, *le magret de canard*. The famous Gascon chef André Daguin claims that it was he who in the 1960s introduced back into fashion a traditional way of using the duck breast of an adult fattened duck if it was not to be put into the *confit* with the rest of the bird. The breast was grilled over a wood fire and served rare, as you would a steak. This was an inspired move on his part, since the process of *confit* had become less common with the arrival of refrigeration—although the legs still had to be made into *confit*, as they are an important ingredient for the great local specialty *cassoulet*.

The result of separating the breast for this dish has since inspired other ways of using it. We were recently at Brive market and found a Périgord producer there selling salted and dried *magrets*, *magrets* stuffed with *foie gras*, and *tournedos de magret au foie gras*, apart from seven differently prepared whole duck *foies gras* and two dozen other duck products, many of them *au foie gras*. It was a very impressive stall.

Magret de canard now features on many restaurant menus internationally. Unfortunately, they are not always, as M. Daguin stressed, from an adult, fattened duck. The force-feeding of the special breeds of duck not only produces a thick layer of fat under the skin, which marbles the flesh as in the best beef, but adds to the texture and flavor of the meat. No restaurant should be using ordinary duck breasts for this dish that, when correctly grilled, is superb.