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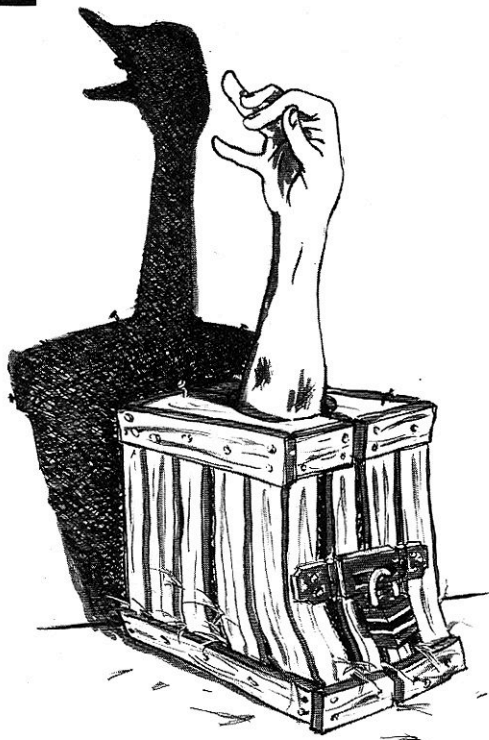


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DUCK SEASON

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT FOIE GRAS?

By Adam Federman



The first recorded evidence of geese being fattened by human hand is a tablature from the ancient Egyptian necropolis of Saqqara near Memphis, dated 2390 BCE. Servants, frozen in time, grab geese by the neck and stuff them with pellets of some sort, probably grain. The geese appear as servile as their handlers, their beaks open and tilted slightly upward. Goose fat, a staple throughout human history, was used in ancient Egypt for medicine and food. But it wasn't until 2,000 years later, during the Roman Empire, that the liver was seen as something to separate from the rest of the animal. Cato discusses the proper way to cram hens and geese but it is Pliny, in his *Natural History*, who observes that "stuffing the bird with food makes its liver grow to a great size" before pondering who to credit with such a good idea: "Not without reason is it a matter of enquiry who was the discoverer of so great a boon—was it Scipio Metellus the Consul, or his contemporary Marcus Seius, Knight of Rome?"

Another 2,000 years later, foie gras is a delicacy most popular in France, which consumes 85 percent of the world's supply. Indeed, it is unmistakably French, and has become the symbol of haute cuisine. Only 30 years ago, the French made wide use of an artisanal method of hand-feeding geese and ducks known as *gavage*. But over the last two decades *gavage* has given way to large-scale industrial production and a set of degraded living conditions for the animals. Most are kept in cages without enough room to turn around or stretch their wings. Their heads stick out of a hole on top of the cages and they are fed by means of a pneumatic device that allows the farm worker to administer the same quantity of food in two to three seconds rather than 30 to 45, and thus feed 800 to 1,000 animals in a 12 to 14 day period. "The speed of this method," says Michael Ginor in his book *Foie Gras: A Passion*, "allows each worker to relate to each bird about as much as a soda factory worker relates to a bottle." The livers, no longer taken into the countryside in wicker ➔

baskets, are canned and dumped on supermarket shelves.

At Hudson Valley Foie Gras, a 200-acre farm just south of the Catskills in Ferndale, N.Y., 7,000 ducks are slaughtered each week. The farm, run by Ginor and Israeli expat Izzy Yanay, combines the industrial and artisanal methods. The ducks are never confined to cages, though they do spend the last three to four weeks of life in small wooden structures that resemble cribs, 11 or 12 to a pen, being force-fed three times a day. The seven feeding rooms are dark at all times. In each, a row of dim bulbs runs along the center of the ceiling and ceiling fans keep warm air circulating. A plastic motorized funnel attached to a tube hangs from an elastic cord above each pen. Each feeder is responsible for approximately 350 ducks. The feeder sits on a stool inside the pen, places the duck between her legs, and brings the tube to the duck's beak—never the other way around. She inserts the tube into the esophagus until it reaches the crop, a kind of antechamber of the duck's stomach, and then flips a switch on the side of a funnel, which activates a motor. Corn is poured into the funnel and a wire auger, once a stick, pushes it down into the crop. After about 30 seconds the crop is nearly full, and the tube is removed. The duck takes a drink of water. The feeders try to make sure that the ducks are not harmed, that their esophagi are not damaged, and that the livers are as big and round and beautiful as possible. Each feeder feeds the same ducks every day, and every Sunday, Yanay calculates the bonus each deserves, which depends on the quality of the livers they produce.

I visited Hudson Valley on an early June day, when rain fell slow and steady, casting the farm and everything on it in a dreary light. Yanay and I entered the feeding room while the ducks were between meals. Most rocked back and forth on wire mesh through which their excrement falls into shallow pools. They seemed to be floating in water but the motion, languid and eerie, was a function of heavy breathing. Panting, in fact. Their beaks were open, long tongues protruding.

Force feeding significantly increases the weight of the liver and of the bird, so most of the ducks were sitting down. For many of them it is very difficult to walk or even stand—when they tried, they were in obvious discomfort. Many simply gave up. I approached the pens, but they didn't seem to notice anything at all. One tried to stand but, hobbled by its own weight, lay down instead, resting its head on the back of another duck. Except for the panting of the ducks and the whir of the fans, the room was silent.

Once the ducks are fattened, which takes between 21 and 31 days (the longer the better, although not so long that the duck dies), they are transported to the slaughterhouse, the only time they are confined in a cage. At a large industrial operation, 18,000 ducks might be processed by 11 a.m.; at Hudson Valley no more than 1,000 ducks a day are killed.

In the slaughterhouse the ducks are taken from cages one at a time and hung by their feet from a movable track that resembles a clothing rack at a dry cleaner. They are stunned in an electrified water bath. Six seconds later, their throats are sliced. It is all done by hand, unlike at a factory farm, where chickens' throats are cut by machine. The margin of error with such machines is significant. At 7,200 birds an hour, many are not even dead before they end up in scalding hot water, where they are boiled alive. Watching from across the room, I saw blood dripping down the front of the executioner's yellow apron. The ducks bleed for 12 seconds before being plunged into scalding water to remove the feathers. ➔

make your own fire grass shadow puppet.



fig. 1

(“It’s like a spa,” Yanay quipped. “Only they’re dead.”) The remaining feathers are plucked and the head, wings, and feet removed. They, and the viscera, are the only parts of the duck that are not sold.

Only male ducks are raised for foie gras. Hudson Valley sends its female ducks to be slaughtered in Trinidad.

The art of getting fat, delicious livers out of geese hasn’t changed that much over time. Goose liver largely disappeared from tables at the end of the Roman Empire, when gastronomy in general declined. Foie gras was no longer something people indulged in, wrote about, or made the subject of tablatures. The goose, however, remained a centerpiece of cuisine, particularly Jewish cuisine, throughout the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance foie gras reappeared, and with it, detailed accounts of force feeding.

Charles Estienne, in his 1554 *L’Agriculture et la Maison Rustique*, instructed cooks to select the finest and largest young geese and place them in a “cellar or in some dark and warm place” and feed them three times a day on a diet of barley flour and wheat soaked in water and honey. He noted that some farmers “pluck the feathers from the stomach and the thighs and the big feathers of the wings,” and that others even “dig out their eyes to fatten them.” It was also common practice to nail the geese’s feet to the ground. But the use of an instrument, a funnel attached to a pipe, to feed the animals is not mentioned until the early 19th century. In an 1805 appendix to a new edition of Olivier de Serres’s *Le Theatre D’Agriculture*, an encyclopedia of French, farming, hunting, and food first published in 1600, Alsatian farmers are described as using a “funnel of tin” attached to a pipe, “16 centimeters long and 20 millimeters in diameter.” The Alsatian farmers were a bit more humane, leaving nailing and blinding behind. Their pipes were “fluted and rounded” to prevent chafing, and fitted with a stick to keep grain moving in a steady stream. Serrees described it thus: “The housewife, crouching on her knees, puts the instrument into the throat of the goose, which she holds with one hand, taking, with the other, some grain that is within reach, letting it flow slowly, and the stick little by little makes sure that it moves along.” Aside from a turn to man-made hybrids, ducks, remarkably little has changed in the production of foie gras over the last two hundred years.

Americans were denied the pleasures and controversies of foie gras until the early 1980s, when they began to produce it domestically. Previously, foie gras had been imported from France. But in the 1970s, when Exotic Newcastle Disease, a particularly infectious viral disease, began to wipe out whole flocks of birds, the U.S. banned the importation of all French poultry products. It wasn’t uncommon, however, for young chefs to smuggle foie gras in a suitcase or buried in a box of fresh fish. Other than the black market, the only way to find it was in an adulterated form like pâté served cold and coated with aspic, *mi-cuit* (partially cooked) or canned “block” foie gras sautéed for Tournedos Rossini, a decadent dish of tournedos, or beef fillets, browned in butter and layered with truffles and foie gras, topped off with a port wine or sherry reduction. (The recipe was popularized in Julia Child’s 1961 classic, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.)

That all changed in the early 1980s when Yanay, a graduate of the University of Rehovot's agriculture school who was working at Carmel Meat Products, met Yosi Nishry, a turkey farmer, in the northern Israeli village of Bethlehem. While at Carmel Yanay had been approached by a friend who claimed to have invented a way to crossbreed two types of ducks. (Ducks, as opposed to geese, were not regulated by the Israeli government.) Yanay experimented with the ducks for three years before he left Carmel for the US in August 1982; Nishry followed soon after. With the backing of an investor, they bought out a farm called Commonwealth—the farm that, in 1989, officially became Hudson Valley. In the fall of 1983, having successfully bred a new duck known as the *moulard*, a cross between the Pekin and the Muscovy, they filled a box with the first 500 livers produced in the U.S. and drove down to New York City. Armed with a list of French restaurants culled from *New York* magazine, they arrived in Manhattan in the evening. Stomping around town in work clothes and rubber boots, they hadn't sold a single liver when they made one last stop at Les Trois Petits Cochons, a pâté manufacturer where Ariane Daguin, daughter of Hotel de Frances' Andre Daguin, arguably the world's foremost authority on foie gras, was working. Daguin, like the other chefs, thought they were smugglers.

Yanay managed to convince Daguin that he had a farm capable of producing 50,000 livers. "It was a very historic moment," Daguin said in Ginor's *Foie Gras: A Passion*, "the first fresh foie gras in America."

Shortly thereafter Ariane left her job to start D'Artagnan, America's largest purveyor of foie gras and specialty meats. Meanwhile, Yanay continued to produce foie gras until the late 1980s, when a falling out with his partners at Commonwealth led to his departure. He spent the next year driving a tractor-trailer to support his family. And then he met Michael Ginor.

Ginor had fallen in love with foie gras in Israel, where he spent much of his childhood. Although he was born in Seattle to Israeli parents, he would later serve, like Yanay, in the Israeli Defense Forces. When Ginor returned from Israel in 1989 he was disappointed with the quality of foie gras available in America. At Café Rakel in New York, Ginor learned from then chef Thomas Keller that there was only one supplier in the country. It was at that moment, Ginor explains in his book, that foie gras "developed an entrepreneurial dimension."

He decided to get in touch with the one person who knew something about it—Ariane Daguin. Daguin was, coincidentally, renting a production facility from an old friend of Ginor's. Through Daguin, Ginor got to Yanay, and the two founded Hudson Valley Foie Gras. In 1992 they acquired Commonwealth and were soon producing thousands of livers every week.

Israel's ban on force feeding went into effect last April; the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Turkey, Holland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and six of Austria's nine provinces have also either explicitly outlawed force feeding or interpreted existing laws to prevent the practice. The European Union is considering a ban, too. The Israeli operation, for its part, is already moving to Hungary—where, according to Yanay, they will produce more foie gras than ever before. The North American foie gras industry, which includes farms in the United States and Canada, is worth an estimated \$20 million. ➡



Yanay's office consists of little more than a desk with a telephone on it. When I arrive he is on a conference call with his farm manager Marcus and Daguin, who is on speakerphone. "We have to get things moving in Chicago," Daguin says, her seductive Gascon accent raising the stakes.

They're discussing NAFGA, the North American Foie Gras Producers Association, an advocacy group that's concerned less with forcing open new markets than it is about protecting an existing one. (According to Yanay, they are hoping to develop a consumer website, *Enough is Enough*, to counter what he calls the "lies and baloney that the other side is spewing and publishing.") Daguin is referring to a Chicago City Council ordinance passed in April that banned the sale of foie gras, imposing fines of no less than \$250 and no more than \$500 for each offense.

Inspired in part by renowned chef Charlie Trotter, who stopped selling foie gras at his eponymous Chicago restaurant last year, the City Council cited the unethical treatment of ducks and geese that are "inhumanely force fed" as the impetus behind the measure. A nationwide Zogby poll taken before the Council voted showed that nearly 80 percent of Americans favored a ban, and also supported pending legislation in California outlawing production by 2012. But it was Chicago Alderman Joe Moore who introduced the resolution and provided a sweeping defense of the city's decision. In a statement issued before the ordinance passed, Moore said, "Our laws are a reflection of our culture ... Our culture does not condone the torture of innocent and defenseless creatures. And we as a society believe all God's creatures should be treated humanely."

Whatever "we as a society believe," the day the ban went into effect this August, chefs across Chicago put foie gras on the menu in protest. "We really don't think the City Council should decide what Chicagoans eat," Grant DePorter of Harry Caray's Restaurant told the *New York Times*. "What's next? Some other city outlaws brussel sprouts?"

Chefs across the country have weighed in, including Thomas Keller (who buys his livers from Hudson Valley), of the famed French Laundry and Per Se in Manhattan's new Time Warner Center, and Rick Tramonto, of Tru in Chicago, who called Trotter a "hypocrite." Some are already making noise about underground restaurants; others are issuing doomsday predictions that this is only the beginning. ("What's next? Sex?" Didier Durand, an Illinois chef, told the *Agence France Press*.) Trotter, for his part, has distanced himself from the animal rights activists (he calls them "idiots") and has declared himself a libertarian—he won't serve foie gras himself, but doesn't think it should be regulated, either. (He also doesn't like smoking bans in restaurants.) Last I checked he still had veal heart on his spring menu.

If it were as simple as Alderman Moore claims, if it were a question of the humane treatment of animals or of torture, there would be very little meat consumed within Chicago's city limits. Or eggs. Or fish. Certainly no soft-shell crabs, which are still alive when delivered in small boxes (at least they're lined with kelp) only to have their eyes, lungs, and finally their assholes cut off with a pair of scissors before being dusted in flour and deep-fried.

But is the foie gras ban really about treating animals more humanely—or about activists using the practice of force-feeding ducks as a symbol of all that is wrong with animal agriculture? It doesn't hurt that foie gras is something that few people actually eat. It's expensive—the livers fetch a price worth more than 10 times the whole bird—and tinged with elitism. If

“Is the foie gras ban about treating animals humanely—or about activists using it as a symbol of what’s wrong with animal agriculture?”



Chicago had tried to ban bacon, Alderman Moore would be in a dumpster behind one of the abandoned stockyards. Indeed, the average American consumes about 51 pounds of pork per year, and the price of a pork chop has fallen roughly a dollar a pound over the last decade. Consumption of chicken, which is even cheaper, has doubled since 1970, and Tyson alone churns out more than 2 billion birds a year. Hudson Valley slaughters a mere 300,000 ducks a year.

The battle in California has been decidedly more pitched than Chicago's. In July 2003 the Mill Valley home of chef Laurent Manrique, a native of Gascony, the principal foie gras-producing region in France, was attacked by animal rights activists. They dumped acid on his car, glued one of the locks shut, and left behind a video of Manrique playing at home with his 2-year-old son. The home of his partner, Didier Jaubert, was also vandalized. And in August 2003 their restaurant—which is part owned by Sonoma Foie Gras founder Guillermo Gonzalez, the only other major producer in the country—was spray-painted and flooded. In 2004 the California State Legislature passed a bill that banned the production and sale of foie gras beginning in 2012, but at the moment it seems likely that the production of foie gras in California will end before the ban goes into effect. Grimaud Farms, the company that processes and distributes Sonoma's ducks and foie gras, terminated its relationship with Gonzalez after Whole Foods, in compliance with its “compassion standards,” said this spring that it would stop doing business with Grimaud. According to Yanay, Gonzalez is already in the process of moving part of his operation to Canada. ➡

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Hudson Valley may be next. When the conference call with Marcus and Daugin ends, Yanay pulls a copy of the regional paper, the *Times Herald-Record*, from a stack of magazines on his desk. He points to the headline on the cover: “Foie gras company accused of 900 violations of Clean Water Act.” The Humane Society’s intent to sue (a notice required under the Clean Water Act before a suit can be filed in federal court) alleges that Hudson Valley, the largest agricultural enterprise in New York’s Sullivan County, has discharged illegal amounts of chlorine, fecal coliform, and ammonia into the Middle Mongaup River. The Society is seeking the maximum \$27,500 fine for each offense, a total of \$25 million. It has also presented a 16-page petition to regulators in Albany asking the Department of Agriculture and Markets to declare foie gras an “adulterated” product, a distinction typically applied to rotten or mislabeled meat. The group argues that the method of force-feeding induces a condition known as hepatic steatosis, or fatty liver disease.

Yanay doesn’t have much patience for the animal rights lobby, which he claims is on the “warpath against animal agriculture of any kind.” He cites a recent \$420,000 grant given by New York State to Hudson Valley to help the farm improve its buildings and modernize its waste treatment facilities as the impetus behind the allegations and contends that at least 860 of the violations can be attributed to typographical errors made by the recording engineer who audits the farm. Yanay then opens the paper to page 3 and stabs his finger at the article. “They are lying,” he says. “The question is why they are lying. They want to challenge our reputation.”

I ask if he has another copy of the paper. He says he does and begins to rifle through the

stack of magazines on his desk—*Forbes*, *Vogue*, *New York*—all of which include articles on Hudson Valley. Then he looks up and tells me that he tore it to pieces.

In his book *Simple French Food*, Richard Olney tells of a Perigord farmwife who described the tenderness with which the animals on her farm were treated and the “excitement experienced as the moment arrives to delicately slit the abdomen, to lovingly—ever so gently—pry it open, exposing finally the huge, glorious, and tender blond treasure, fragile object of so many months’ solicitous care and of present adoration. One sensed vividly the goose’s plenary participation, actively sharing in the orgasmic beauty of the sublime moment for which her life had been lived.”

I hoped to experience these heights of glory when I entered the evisceration room. Things were already humming along, so there was no time to prepare. We walked over to the table, a conveyor of disjointed cutting boards that cycle around and around, like the tread on a tank, as the blood and remaining pieces of viscera and fat fell to the floor. There were four people on each side and one USDA inspector in the middle. She was wearing a white hard hat with the blue letters of her employer emblazoned on the front.

The ducks had spent the previous 16 hours in the fridge. Each one, marked with a red, blue, or green metal tie to indicate who their feeder had been, was wheeled in on metal racks and carried to the front of the (dis)assembly line. We stood just behind José, who has been opening ducks and removing livers for more than 20 years. With three swift cuts he dismantled the duck and plucked its firm, grayish liver from the inner cavity. It happened so fast that I missed the “sublime moment” in which the farmer, the animal, and the on-looker share in the “orgasmic beauty.” The first cut was made along the abdomen, at a slight arc, just below the rib cage but above the liver. (Of course, the liver, concealed by fat, skin and bones, is impossible to see, but after 20 years, José knows how to find it). He then pulled the fat away, further exposing the carcass. Two small lateral cuts disconnected the rib cage from the muscle on each side and the bird was pried open to reveal the fragile object. It’s not really as fragile as it looks, because after being refrigerated for 16 hours, it’s quite firm. (In France, the birds are eviscerated just after they’re killed and still warm. So the effect is different—more like when you kill a fish and gut it while its heart is still beating.) But given that it’s practically worth its weight in gold, the liver commands a great deal of respect.

The entire process took maybe eight seconds. Then the carcass—minus the liver, which was on its way to be weighed and assessed (any visible blood or bile is removed) before being put on ice for three days and stored at 34 degrees to draw the rest of the blood out, making it as white as possible—was passed on to Alva, José’s wife. Alva is in charge of removing the viscera, a grey and yellow tangled mass that is then passed along to Jackie, the USDA inspector, who makes sure there’s nothing wrong with it. The viscera end up in a yellow waste bucket and the duck continues on its way until there is nothing left but a hollow carcass. Later that day, what remained—the breast (magret), gizzard, legs, thighs, and even the feathers—was trimmed, packaged, and sold. Three days later the livers were shrink-wrapped, given their final grading, and sent to restaurants, distributors, and processors. ➡

Since 1983, the year that Tyson invented the chicken nugget and Yanay began producing foie gras, American agriculture has become an industrial behemoth. Each year more and more animals are slaughtered on fewer and fewer farms. Cows, fed their fellow cows in cheap feed, have become cannibals, and the threat of avian flu hangs over poultry farmers—and their poultry—everywhere. Chickens grow three times as fast as they did in the 1950s and an average steer is fattened in 14 months instead of three years. Turkeys have been bred to produce such oversized breasts that they can't mate and must be artificially inseminated. Ninety percent of pigs are raised indoors. In the last decade, scientists have cut 13 days off the time it takes a hog to reach market weight, and in the next few decades most of the fish and seafood we eat will be farmed. The whole system is sustained with abundant supplies of cheap corn and lots of antibiotics. Meanwhile, the price of meat has plummeted, its quality has declined, and Americans are eating more and more of it. Obesity is an epidemic, an outcome of over-eating; non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is the most common liver disease in the U.S. (What A.J. Liebling once decried as the "hepatic fallacy" has in a sense become true. Liebling lamented that the French "discovery" of the human liver led to the end of the gourmand, of men and women who knew how to eat.) The family farm has essentially been decimated, and the food industry has created the perfect consumer, what Michael Pollan calls the "industrial eater."

Yet eating has become more complicated, even as much of what is consumed has become more homogenous. Thanksgiving used to be about football and turkey. Now we might wonder where our turkey comes from, if the Sunday roast was produced from a cow that was grass fed, if the pig lived outside, if the fish was farmed or wild or about to be extinct, if the eggs came from hens who lived a decent life. It's likely that there's a vegetarian or two at the table, and their presence will lead to some kind of conversation about where the food is from, how it was raised, and whether we should be eating it.

"A lot of people didn't know what foie gras was," said Dottie Moylan, who has worked for Yanay for 13 years. "We educated them." But perhaps too well, or not well enough. At 57, Yanay doesn't see much of a future for himself in the mini empire he helped create. He gives himself 10 years and American foie gras 15. He knows he's a target, a symbol for something bigger than himself and what he does, and that he'll be driven out of business. Animal activists have painted him as the Cruella de Vil of family farmers, slaughtering puppies for a fur coat. They took him out because they could. He was an easy mark.

"You can't start with Tyson," he tells me, a picture of an old woman with a goose between her knobby legs, smiling—the Perigord farmwife I've been searching for—on the wall behind him. "It's too big, too strong. But you can start with the foie gras guy who doesn't have any money. It is a winnable thing. It's small. It's not important. It's only for the rich." ✦