



"Some foods we take from the world by force. Others, like eggs, seem freely given."
—Abe Opincar, *Fried Butter: A Food Memoir*

LIKE A VIRGIN:

Eating Foie Gras for the Very First Time

IN FIRST GRADE I sat next to a redheaded kid who wore black high-top Keds, picked his nose, and ate paste. The ingredients in that thick white paste looked just like the creamy filling stuffed inside a Twinkie: powdered sugar blended with Crisco. So I tried paste once. And I don't need to try it again. But in the first example of my profoundly bad taste in men, I carried a torch for the booger boy until I was twelve.

On an adventurous-eaters scale of one to ten – and up against crazy, live cobra heart-swallowers like Anthony Bourdain – I'd say I'm somewhere in the middle range. With enough peer pressure I'll try anything: squid ink, pig trotters, unagi, blood sausage, and – *well* – paste. But there's one thing I can't abide, and that's liver. My mom cooked beef liver and onions in a cast-iron skillet, and the odor of death that surrounded that sizzling black mass made me want to retch. So I'm a little anxious about the appearance of what is said to resemble a diminutive, deflated football on so many Bay Area menus. Fancy *fwah grab* is everywhere and I fear "fat livers" may soon turn up at my local café or – heaven help us – the lunchroom at work.

Sooner or later I'll have to fess up to the fact that I've never touched the stuff. And where I've hoped for the best but experienced the worst in life's other first time thrills, with foie gras I'm demanding both pleasure and performance and I will not settle for less.

FOIE GRAS pâté contains the broken bits and pieces of what is considered to be the ultimate gourmet delicacy – fatty fowl liver – whipped up into a foamy, spreadable paste and studded with enough fresh black Périgordine truffle to cover up the liver flavor. In the Bay Area, foie gras pâté is so easy to find that the very idea of taking that pedestrian pile of puree as my first leaves me feeling kind of slutty.

At Andronico's or Cosentino's I can casually pick up a hunk of whole French foie gras in a can (blonde, and straight off an intercontinental flight from Paris). And if I'm too lazy to get dolled up, Petrossian's e-commerce division will send a 1.1-pound whole duck or

goose liver delicately poached with herbs right to my front door. But that's as creepy as hooking up in an Internet chat room: the virtual logon is "Rich & Plump," but "Stingy, Big Gut" could be what I encounter in the dining room.

Technology does have its uses. Web sites, including Petrossian's, straightforwardly explain the facts of foie: the fattened livers of duck, *foie gras de canard*, are considered to have more flavor and character than that of geese, *foie gras d'oi*, which are said to combine a lovely "sweetness and delicacy." A good goose liver is hard to find, however. These birds are susceptible to disease, and production is limited to the tiniest of quantities distributed from France, Israel and Hungary.

New York's Hudson River Foie Gras – run by Michael Ginor, co-author of *Foie Gras: A Passion* – has developed an artificial insemination technique that crosses female Pekin ducks with male Muscovys. Shades of Doctor Frankenstein, this off-color act creates an infertile, submissive and disease-resistant breed called the Moulard. The Moulard is the food world's new Miss Popularity and Hudson River supplies everyone from the White House to Wolfgang Puck's Spago in L.A. And Hudson's *tres chic* liver is as yellow as the cornmeal their hybrid ducks are force-fed in a standard French technique called "gavage" or – pardon my *English* – "crammed."

Gavage is about as arousing as the clubbing of baby seals. Some farmers – much like high school football heroes – claim they're doing the adorable duckies a favor by stuffing the fowl's innards to the breaking point. I've even read stories where a cheerful *gavense* compares geese to puppies who "playfully nip at heels" as they demand "cramming" time and time again. In the past, "cramming" was, traditionally, a woman's responsibility. But in sharp contrast to the way men handle birth control, when it comes to "cramming," they've taken charge. These creepy cross-breeders have even put a sexy spin on the ancient word gavage – now calling it one of the "modern techniques of animal husbandry."

Unsurprisingly, there is no shortage of outrage from animal rights activists when you type a query for "gavage" into your Internet browser. But there is, thankfully, humor in the form of a fictionalized site for what could be a unique and aptly named American restaurant.

At trend-setting *La Gavage*, the chef's goal would be to:

"...make French cuisine appeal to Americans without sacrificing tradition. Thus was born La Gavage, a restaurant which uses the ancient French technique of force-feeding to provide Americans with the type of dining experience that suits their barbaric lifestyle. The technique is traditionally used to produce foie gras, the enlarged fatty liver of ducks or geese which is considered a delicacy the world over. The traditional method involves inserting a long funnel into the bird's throat and pumping a slurry of ground corn and water directly into the bird's stomach to ensure obesity. While this method has occasionally been criticized as cruel when applied to farm animals, at La Gavage we have learned through experience that American diners consider the discomfort they experience to be greatly outweighed by the large amount of food they can ingest in such a short time."

Other than the jokesters at www.randomscripts.com, foie gras is very serious Web business. D'Artagnan – imported food purveyors housed in romantic Newark, New Jersey – offer to send out lip-smacking *Sushi Gascon et French Kiss* (foie gras rolled in duck prosciutto with prunes marinated in armagnac and stuffed with foie gras mousse). And the recipes posted on The Golden Egg's Web site – a broker that ships regional foods direct to the consumer – include a platter of Sautéed Foie Gras with Spinach so healthy sounding that I considered touching foie for the very first time in the privacy of my own kitchen. Then I read Katherine Alford's book, *Caviar, Truffles, and Foie Gras: Recipes for Divine Indulgence*, and her de-

scription of cleaning the liver by poking around wet orbs to make sure there's no green bile was just too much for me to stomach.

They'll be no nasty probing of moist recesses smeared with icky gunk for this girl.

THE ROMAN POET HORACE said liver is, "the seat of the passions, particularly sensual love and anger." And on the East coast, *New York Times* reporter Nick Ravo has uncovered evidence of irrational, lustful behavior that includes barbecued foie gras, foie gras pizza, and foie gras quesadillas. On the West coast we've retained our sanity in matters of the foie – *so far*. But when I ask for counsel, my food-loving Bay Area peer group intimidates me with a wealth of experience.

Renée – about whom it is whispered that she hopped from restaurant to restaurant before getting knocked up – suggests that I relax and enjoy it and top things off with a slurry of blueberry sauce as she did one unforgettable hot summer night in Sonoma.

A much younger work buddy, Peter, claims to have done it often – advising that I "hold out for the best, the French Laundry or Aqua, where it's sautéed so well the outside is crispy but the interior melts on your tongue." Frankly, I believe this to be the boast of a bluffer. Why would Thomas Keller waste one of his hard-to-get French Laundry tables on a boy who talks about foie gras like it's a custard-filled Krispy Kreme doughnut?

Temptation is everywhere. Pricey Campton Place Restaurant just off Union Square features ravioli of foie gras with sweet corn, chanterelle mushrooms and duck bouillon. And – if rumors are true – Campton Place occasionally puts out a foie gras *cart* featuring mounds of sinful treats worthy of Fellini's *Satyricon*.

Also comfortable with an orgy, Fleur de Lys patrons are gobbling up cold Hudson Valley foie gras and smoked duck breast in Gewurztraminer gelée, a pistachio-crust foie gras "mi-cuit," traditional foie gras terrine, and foie gras en gelée gazpacho with day boat scallops.

Less stamina challenging is Bistro Jeanty where *Croutons de Foie Blond* (duck foie gras pâté with port-poached pear) is the only offering, and at Brix, where seared foie gras is served simply with toasted brioche and sour cherry sauce.

Just reading all these options exhausts me. Maybe I should head to the newly renovated Restaurant Jeanty at Jacks? If they've kept the historic private rooms used by early 20th-century bons vivants during midnight trysts, I can lie down on a red velvet chaise and enjoy *Foie Gras au Torchon* (duck foie gras with sauternes jelly) on my back. Such an old-fashioned encounter reminds me of author Abe Opincar's evocation of a sex ed class where a reel-to-reel projector ejaculated images from an 'educational' film entitled: *The Miracle of Life*.

Watching cartoon sperm violate quivering ovum, Opincar says he felt numb:

"When the most valiant sperm, twitching in spasms, drilled its way into the passive egg... How could it be that these stupid, speechless, buglike things, acting only on instinct, produced human beings? How could a miracle be so ugly?"

As ugly as, say, *gavage*?

WHAT IF I'M JUST NOT THE KIND OF GIRL that goes in for this stuff? I sure don't want to end up a lonely old maid crying over lost livers, but I'm tired of always gagging things down.

The words of *Caviar, Truffles, and Foie Gras* author Alford have begun to haunt me like the memory of a bad-boy boyfriend:

"The argument that the process of force feeding is abusive is a complicated issue and one that requires individual decision. Individual food choice reflects our beliefs, and everyone must make choices that they are comfortable with. It is important to respect and honor all the creatures that nourish us, and we shouldn't eat anything without considering the effect it has on ourselves and the environment."

It's time to respect myself, too, damn it!

I must finally admit that I just can't relate to these hip liver-loving scene-sters. I have more in common with my feathered friends who get "crammed" over and over again by a boss, a landlord and a master.

So go ahead. Call me what you like: a prude and a tease.

I'm keeping my lips pressed tightly together.

—Kate Blood is a freelance writer living in Northern California