THE GREAT DEBATE

by Chantel Dartnall

Foie gras is one of the most controversial topics in the food industry and one that is not entered into if you are not looking for hefty debate. As with numerous other fierce arguments, there are two extreme groups - those in favour of producing and consuming foie gras and those who are so opposed to it that they are prepared to lie on the tracks with a high speed train heading straight towards them to prove a point.

There have been numerous campaigns to ban the gorging of birds for the commercial and private production of foie gras. This has even led to certain states in the United States of America banning the delicacy.

However - is this the solution?

Unfortunately, an outright ban does not always bring the desired results. One only has to think of prohibition when the consumption and sale of liquor was outlawed in the United States. This led to a roaring black market trade in alcoholic beverages and the market was flooded with extremely bad quality. By banning foie gras outright, activists and concerned citizens may not achieve their desired result of preventing the gorging of ducks and geese, but may instead create a similar demand for these products on the black market.

This equally may prevent any incentive to treat the animals humanely and opportunistic producers are more likely to spend their time looking at ways of not getting caught.

Most chefs and suppliers that I know support sustainable and humane farming, whether it be meat, or other produce, while consumers are becoming more aware of knowing where their food comes from and how it was produced.

It is our responsibility as restaurateurs and consumers to dictate, through our purchases, how our food is produced and supplied. If more consumers started buying organically grown produce or sustainable fish, a larger demand for these products would spur farmers and suppliers to fill the need. This would eventually result in produce which is not only good for us and our budgets, but more importantly also good for our environment.

Sympathetic towards the vegetarian cause for several years, I have always been conscious of the origins of the ingredients I source for my restaurant, especially when it comes to animal products. Sourcing humanely produced foie gras is no different. I am sure that to most readers the concept of sustainable and compassionately produced foie gras sounds bizarre, but it is possible and aparently it is happening in the international market.

With France currently being one of the leading producers and a major consumer of duck and goose foie gras, and Hungary trailing not far behind, it may be surprising to discover that the solution to humanely produced foie gras comes from Spain.

Farmer Eduardo Sousa was one of the first pioneers when it came to the production of foie gras in a more acceptable manner. Sousa looked to nature for a solution and presented his ideas at the international TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) conference formed to disseminate ideas worth spreading.

Geese and ducks are omnivorous migratory animals and like many birds have expansive throats allowing them to store

large amounts of food in their crops awaiting digestion in the stomach. A wild duck may therefore double its weight in the autumn, storing fat throughout much of its body and especially in the liver, in preparation for winter migration. Sousa provided his geese with a spread of regional foods including figs, nuts and herbs knowing that the geese will instinctively devour the food. By winter the birds could be seen waddling around, their swollen bellies nearly dragging on the ground as a result of their natural gluttony. This is also how foie gras was discovered thousands of years ago.

Sousa timed his harvesting of the livers to coincide with the winter migration, when livers are naturally fattened. Although these livers may not meet the legal definition of foie gras in those countries which require a minimum size and fat content, I know quite a few people who prefer to consume these rather than their larger counterparts. They know they can savour this buttery and rich natural delicacy with a clear conscience.

Although this practice of providing ducks and geese with a variety of ingredients to feast on is proving to be more costly for farmers (as is organically grown produce), a substantial number of producers have opted to implement this humane solution and have to date been producing commercially on a small scale.

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