

Is Luxury Cruel? The Foie Gras Divide



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

FOCUS OF ATTENTION These Moulard ducklings will be force-fed until their livers are engorged. They are being raised at California's sole maker of foie gras, a farm in Sonoma.

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THE signing of a bill by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last week banning the production and sale of foie gras in California was a watershed moment in a protracted battle of culinary politics. It has pitted animal rights supporters, including Sir Paul McCartney and Martin Sheen, against Guillermo Gonzalez, a 52-year-old businessman from El Salvador who is the state's lone producer of foie gras.

Animal rights groups called the signing a major victory for the ducks and geese. They object to foie gras because it is made by force-feeding ducks and geese to create creamy, fat-engorged livers. The measure, which is to take effect in 2012, was sponsored by John Burton of San Francisco, the Democratic president pro tem of the State Senate, and was drafted by four animal rights groups.

In this bastion of liberal politics and vengeful living well, the governor's move was perceived by some chefs, restaurateurs and consultants here as an affront to the state's very identity.

"They'll all go to Vegas," Dan Scherotter, the executive chef of Palio d'Asti in San Francisco and a board member of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, said about fans of haute cuisine. "It's ironic that in California, of all places, a tiny minority can insist on force-feeding the omnivorous majority."

Animal rights activists have called foie gras, which is made by feeding grain mush to geese and Moulard ducks with a hydraulic pump through a metal tube, the "delicacy of despair." Last year

some activists vandalized a cafe in Sonoma owned by Mr. Gonzalez; Laurent Manrique, the chef of Aqua in San Francisco; and Didier Jaubert. They also damaged the men's homes.

Despite the incessant campaign against him, Mr. Gonzalez professed to welcome the measure, which grants him immunity from lawsuits, and gives him seven and a half years, in the governors' words, "for animal husbandry practices to evolve" and to "perfect a humane way for a duck to consume grain to increase the size of its liver through natural processes."

In a telephone interview Mr. Gonzalez, who apprenticed in France, said he knew of no way to make foie gras without force-feeding, but he was "open to the possibility." The birds did not suffer, he said, and he would work with scientists and scholars to find "clear, unbiased answers on the question of the welfare of the ducks," including stress tests.

Dr. George West, staff veterinarian for poultry and swine for the California Department of Food and Agriculture, has said that ducks have no gag reflex, and has called the force-feeding "noninjurious."

Mr. Gonzalez added: "What I am doing is not wrong. This is my livelihood. I've gone through too much pain, cost, suffering and predicament to just give up."

Upon taking effect, the law would not only wipe out Mr. Gonzalez's operation, in the Central Valley, but would also prohibit the sale of foie gras anywhere in California — no matter where it comes from — if it is made by force-feeding birds to enlarge their livers, a centuries-old culinary tradition from Périgord and Gascony known as "gavage."

Dr. Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University and the author of "Food Politics" (California Press, 2003), said: "The governor is on a slippery slope. If he thinks ducks are treated badly, he needs to go visit a slaughterhouse."

She asked: "Are we going to have bootlegged foie gras? Are we going to see celebrity chefs jailed along with Martha Stewart for selling foie gras?"

Paula Wolfert, the author of the classic cookbook "The Cooking of Southern France," put it another way: "These Hollywood people need a trip to the Dordogne. I'd rather be a force-fed duck than a Tyson chicken."

Animal rights groups have already started the latest incarnation of their campaign to educate the public about foie gras and to get it off the menus. Two weeks ago about 15 demonstrators assembled in front of the French Laundry in Yountville, one of the nation's most notable restaurants, distributing fliers and carrying placards showing graphic photographs of dead or dying birds. They also demonstrated at local restaurants, and a visit to the Union Square Cafe in Manhattan is in the works.

"If we pat ducks on the head and give them a hug before we stick the tube down their throat, it is still inhumane," said Dr. Elliot M. Katz, the president and founder of In Defense of Animals, which is planning a sustained presence at top restaurants around the country. "Right now people go to high-class restaurants because they want a special evening. Hopefully they will lose their appetites when forced to look at the pain and suffering of dead birds."

The California law fits into a growing international consensus concerning force-feeding for foie gras, which Israel, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Austria, Germany and other countries have passed laws to ban. It also reflects a broad movement, which has been gaining steam in the United States, to more humane approaches to animal husbandry. "A certain segment of the population is

beginning to consume with conscience," said Paul Waldau, director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Tufts University. "Like the Europeans, Americans are beginning to challenge extremely inhumane food production systems."

Last year, for instance, a nonprofit group called Humane Farm Animal Care, financed by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society of the United States and other organizations, started a certification program for humane food producers. The group, based in Herndon, Va., recruits scientists to evaluate farms and slaughterhouses.

"We all die in the end, but we want the animals to be killed humanely," said Adele Douglass, the group's executive director. Among the 16 producers earning the "certified humane" seal so far are Meyer Natural Angus Beef, DuBreton Natural Pork and Murray's Chicken.

Bill Niman, one of the country's most respected producers of naturally raised hormone-free beef and pork, has been experimenting with politically correct veal, with calves running free in pastures and drinking mothers' milk, rather than being confined in narrow pens. The calves are being raised on family dairy farms in Wisconsin that are threatened by large-scale commercial operations, Mr. Niman said.

"Humane animal husbandry gives animals a chance to manifest their instinctive needs, and translates into a better eating experience," he said. "The fact that people cannot see or witness how their food is being raised is absolutely incredible," he said. "The challenge for us is to make people think about it."

In New York, Assemblyman John J. McEneny said that if he was re-elected in November, he would reintroduce a measure in the Legislature to ban foie gras. The only other American producer of foie gras, Hudson Valley Foie Gras, is in New York.

Mr. McEneny, a Democrat from Albany, said he found it interesting that he was in harmony with Mr. Schwarzenegger on this subject.

"When you curtail the private sector," he said, "it's normally the Republicans and conservatives who hit the panic button."