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# Foie Gras Makers Struggle to Please Critics and Chefs

By JULIET GLASS

TOM BROCK produces foie gras at a Southern California farm, but even he used to feel squeamish when he had to force-feed the geese with an 8- to 10-inch steel tube to fatten their livers.

“I used the traditional tube, and force-fed the traditional way,” Mr. Brock said, “and it was the single most unpleasant experience of my life.”

So he bought a feeding machine that a Hungarian goose farmer had recently invented in his garage workshop. It has a soft rubber tube that Mr. Brock says has been much gentler on his animals.

It may make the birds, and Mr. Brock, feel better. But yet to be seen is whether it will please the animal rights activists who helped California enact a law that will ban foie gras starting in 2012, got Chicago to outlaw the sale of foie gras last year and are threatening similar action in other parts of the country.

Mr. Brock and other producers in the United States and Europe have been trying to find ways to make foie gras that will overcome the objections of those who see their work as an act of cruelty while still pleasing chefs and connoisseurs.

But unlike producers of beef, pork and chicken, who can respond to criticism of their practices by returning to kinder, preindustrial methods of raising cattle, pigs and chickens, foie gras producers have no such bucolic past to fall back on. Since the time of ancient Egyptians, making foie gras has involved doing something unnatural to ducks or geese: fattening their livers by force-feeding them, typically, nowadays, for the last 12 to 21 days of their lives.

Opponents say the procedure using feeding tubes is painful and sickens the birds. Foie gras advocates say the birds do not mind because their gullets are naturally expandable, to let them gorge before migrating.

Some foie gras makers have tried to take advantage of that gorging instinct and eliminate the feeding tubes.

A Spanish company's canned pâté, made entirely from livers of geese that it said had not been force-fed, won the Coup de Coeur for innovation in October at the Paris International Food Salon, a culinary trade show.

The company, Patería de Sousa, says it lets geese roam freely and gorge on grass, acorns, figs and lupines in the Extremadura region of Spain. It says it processes the birds once a year before natural migration, harvesting livers weighing 450 to 500 grams. (French law defines foie gras as fattened liver from a force-fed bird weighing at least 300 grams for ducks and 400 grams for geese.)

But some in the industry doubt Patería's claims. Ariane Daguin, owner of D'Artagnan, a Newark company that was the first to sell fresh foie gras in the United States, said she was skeptical after visiting the company's booth at the food fair.

“I don't want to know their secrets, but there was no confirmation of their claims,” Ms. Daguin said. “If there is a secret diet, fine, but then show me something to confirm you are in the business.”

France's National Institute of Agronomic Research conducted experiments, in 2002 and between 2005 and 2006, controlling geese's and ducks' access to food for a set period and then granting unlimited access to encourage self-gorging. According to Daniel Guémené, the agency's director of research, the livers enlarge to two or three times the normal size, but in terms of fat content and weight "we've been unsuccessful at getting a product that can be marketable as foie gras." He added: "Concerning the Spanish story, I don't say he didn't succeed, but I want to know how he made it. I don't understand it."

In an e-mail message in Spanish, Eduardo Sousa, director of Pateria de Sousa, said that the French researchers "have not taken measures to keep the animals in a truly natural setting, which is the case with our pastures in Extremadura." He added, "Keep in mind that our animals are raised completely free."

He responded dismissively to the skepticism. "To people who say that they don't believe in our system of rearing, tell them that makes no difference to us; I believe what they are after is to copy us," he wrote. "If they do not achieve it, well, the secret is in our fields and in the respect given to the animal."

In Lindsborg, Kan., Frank R. Reese Jr. of the Good Shepherd Turkey Ranch let his French Dewlap Toulouse geese and Rouen ducks, heritage breeds that were once used for foie gras production, eat as much as they wanted, but he ended up getting only very rich livers.

"We've made no promises," Mr. Reese said. "This is not foie gras. "

Likewise, Schiltz Foods, which runs a large goose farm in Sisseton, S.D., produced what it described on its Web site as "natural fatty goose livers: the foie gras alternative" in a pilot program last fall.

The owner, Jim Schiltz, would not describe his process, but said the birds were not force-fed. The livers were meaty in taste and texture, however, and would probably not be a widely accepted substitute for foie gras.

When California passed its law on foie gras in 2004, there seemed to be hope that in the grace period until the law went into effect producers could create methods that would satisfy critics.

"This bill provides seven and a half years for agricultural husbandry practices to evolve and perfect a humane way for a duck to consume grain to increase the size of its liver through natural processes," Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) said in his signing statement. "If agricultural producers are successful in this endeavor, the ban on foie gras sales and production in California will not occur."

But it was clear that those practices could not include force-feeding.

"A person may not force-feed a bird for the purpose of enlarging the bird's liver beyond normal size," the law says.

Still, Mr. Brock said that his Hungarian device did not harm the birds and that it might show that force-feeding need not be considered cruel.

The machine has a rubber tube that can be as short as six inches long and that is flexible enough to wrap around a finger. It has a mechanism to prevent the bird from getting more feed than its gizzard can hold.

Mr. Brock learned about a feeding plan developed by a Hungarian poultry scientist, Dr. Ferenc Bogenfürst, that shortened the time geese were force-fed to 14 or 15 days, from 18 to 21 days, and reduced the number of force-feedings per day. The plan is a variation on the French method of limiting birds' access to food to certain times, both encouraging them to overfeed and preparing their stomachs for force-feeding.

Using the new machine and his version of the feeding method, Mr. Brock raised more than 642 geese last fall. He said that not a single bird was sickened or injured during force-feeding. He plans to raise

12,000 this year.

He said it was clearly healthier. A 1998 [European Union](#) report found that 2.5 percent to 4.2 percent of ducks raised for foie gras died before being slaughtered (for geese, the range was 3.5 percent to 5.3 percent). Marcus Henley, production manager of Hudson Valley Foie Gras in Ferndale, N.Y., the largest American producer, said the company's average fatalities were within the range for ducks.

The [United States Department of Agriculture](#) inspection reports from Grimaud Farms in Stockton, Calif., which processed and distributed Mr. Brock's birds, found that all the geese were healthy. And while the reports indicated that six geese died during the four- to five-hour drive to Grimaud in October and four died during the drive in November, all survived the latest trip, in December.

Izzy Yanay, vice president and general manager of Hudson Valley, said that he was intrigued by what he had heard about Mr. Brock's technique and that he intended to send Mr. Brock ducklings and travel to California to observe their force-feeding this fall.

"I've spoken with my customers who are also his customers and they told me that the foie was nice," he said. "If everything everybody says is correct, this sounds great."

But opponents do not seem satisfied.

"Is a soft rubber tube better than a hard tube?" said Paul Shapiro, director of the factory farming campaign of the [Humane Society of the United States](#), one of the groups that pushed for the California bill. "Maybe, but you are missing the point. You are still forcing them to eat more than they would ever eat voluntarily and inducing a state of disease."

Ms. Daguin of D'Artagnan, who is also president of the Artisan Farmers Alliance, a coalition of American foie gras makers, said that the producers were merely taking advantage of the birds' natural tendency to gorge during migration and that the animals were not injured or sickened.

"There is a pendulum, and people are going overboard," she said of foie gras's critics. "We are a small industry selling an elitist product, it has a French name, and there is a tube in the esophagus, and if you don't know any better, then yes, I would think the same. I think the pendulum will swing the other way."