FOIE GRAS PRODUCTION

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'Foie gras' means 'fatty liver' and is produced by force-feeding ducks and geese twice or three times a day with large amounts of feed for a period of two to three weeks before they are slaughtered. Force-feeding increases the size of the liver by up to ten times and the fat content of the liver exceeds 50%.

The birds most commonly used for foie gras production are the Mule (or Mulard) duck (a cross between the Muscovy and domestic duck) and the Landes (or Landaise) goose. France is the largest producer of foie gras (83% of world production in 2002), mostly from ducks (95%). France also produces around 25% of the world's goose foie gras. Hungary is also a major producer (9% of world production) and is the main producer of goose foie gras (60% of world production). Bulgaria produces mainly duck foie gras (5% of world production), most of which (88%) is exported to France. A French company produces foie gras in China (near Beijing) and foie gras is still produced in the US (mainly in New York State).

THE FORCE-FEEDING PROCEDURE

A feeding tube is inserted into the oesophagus (gullet) and boiled maize mixed with fat is delivered by an auger (a screw which is operated by hand or an electric motor) or a pneumatic or hydraulic system. Mechanised systems may deliver the feed in just 2-3 seconds, allowing one person to force-feed up to 400 caged ducks in an hour.

Ducks are typically force-fed twice a day for 12 to 15 days and geese three times a day for 15 to 21 days. The amount of feed in each meal is considerably greater than normal intake and is increased over the force-feeding period. If force-feeding is stopped, the birds greatly reduce their feed intake for several days.

WELFARE ISSUES

There are very serious welfare issues associated with the production of foie gras:

Housing

During the rearing period, birds are usually kept in barns and may have access to the outdoors for part of the period, although generally they do not have access to a sufficient quantity of open water to allow them to perform much of their natural behaviour. During the force-feeding period, the birds are confined in pens or group cages or, for ducks, individual cages may be used which are so small that the birds cannot turn around, stand erect or stretch their wings. The slatted or wire mesh floors can cause foot injuries. Birds may be kept in near darkness during the force-feeding period, except when being fed.

Health and welfare problems caused by force-feeding

Catching, restraint and the force-feeding procedure cause fear and distress in the birds. The birds move away from the person who force-feeds them, indicating that the procedure is aversive. After

force-feeding, the birds are usually panting and are less well able to move but they still move away or try to move away from the person who force-fed them. Repeated insertion of the feeding tube can cause discomfort, pain and injuries, with the possibility of infection.

Force-feeding results in steatosis of the liver, a condition in which large fat globules accumulate in the liver cells to an extent not seen in any normal bird and which is considered pathological by most experts. Liver structure and function is severely altered and compromised. The enlarged liver may cause discomfort and malaise and forces the legs outwards so that the birds have difficulty standing and their natural gait and ability to walk can be severely impaired.

Force-fed birds develop increasingly liquid faeces, are less active and are more likely to suffer from bone fractures, liver lesions, respiratory disorders and 'wet neck' – a condition where the neck feathers become curved and sticky.

Mortality

Mortality during the force-feeding period is typically over 4% in geese and over 3% in ducks, which is 10 to 20 times higher than in non-force-fed birds. If the birds were not slaughtered when they are, it is generally accepted that they would die from the effects of force-feeding, in particular from failure of liver function.

EXPERT OPINION

The consensus of expert opinion is that force-feeding for foie gras production is a serious welfare problem and several jurisdictions treat it as animal cruelty. The EU's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) concluded in 1998 that: "*Force feeding, as currently practised, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds.*" The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stated in 2002 that the production of fatty liver for foie gras "*raises serious animal welfare issues and it is not a practice that is condoned by FAO.*" In 1999, the Council of Europe issued recommendations that force-feeding of ducks and geese should only be permitted in countries where it already occurs, that ducks should not be kept in individual cages and that countries permitting foie gras production should encourage research into alternative production methods that do not involve force-feeding.

Force-feeding for foie gras production is specifically prohibited or prevented by general animal welfare legislation in many countries, including most provinces in Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. Under a 2004 law, the force-feeding of ducks and geese and the sale of products produced through force-feeding will be prohibited in the State of California from 2012.

ALTERNATIVES TO FORCE-FEEDING

A moderate increase in liver size and fat content is not abnormal in some birds as a method of energy storage. Some farmers produce smaller and less fatty livers from ducks and geese without

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force-feeding. These are offered as a substitute for foie gras (such as 'Faux Gras'), sometimes called 'ethical foie gras' or 'humane foie gras'. The Pateria de Sousa 'self-gorging' foie gras produced in Spain comes from geese kept in very extensive free range conditions. The geese have enlarged livers but only about half the minimum size of conventional goose foie gras. This is a premium product, costing several times more than conventional foie gras.

Currently, foie gras can only be labelled as such if the liver is at least 300g for ducks and 400g for geese, a size which is commonly produced by unnatural force-feeding that causes welfare problems. Pateria de Sousa achieves this without the need for force-feeding, highlighting the unnecessary nature of the practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

You can help to protect ducks and geese from being force-fed for foie gras production in a number of ways:

- ✓ Join Compassion in World Farming's campaigns or donate to our work at ciwf.org;
- ✓ Download our Compassionate Shopping Guide from ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets;
- ✓ If you see foie gras on sale in a shop, contact the manager to explain the suffering involved in conventional foie gras production and ask them not to stock it (a number of retail chains have already taken the decision not to stock foie gras because of the welfare concerns). You could suggest that they try to source duck and goose liver that is humanely produced without force-feeding or excessive liver enlargement;
- ✓ If you see foie gras on the menu in a restaurant, take the opportunity to explain to the manager about the suffering caused to force-fed ducks and geese and ask them to consider removing it from their menu. If you let us know, we will write to them too;
- ✓ You can find out more about the welfare standards of the UK's major supermarkets from our Supermarket Survey Report at ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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Revised September 2010

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Revised September 2010