



Foie Gras: The cruelty behind the delicacy

Foie gras, which literally translates as 'fatty liver', is the product of significant animal cruelty. It is produced by force-feeding ducks and geese so intensively that their livers become diseased and enlarged. This causes great suffering and can make it difficult for the birds to walk and breathe normally.

The majority of the world's foie gras is now made from ducks, and 75% is produced in France. Around 700,000 geese and 34.7 million ducks are slaughtered each year in the process of making French foie gras. Hungary is also a major producer, particularly of goose foie gras. Duck foie gras is also produced in Bulgaria and mainly exported to France.

The force-feeding procedure

The production of foie gras involves force-feeding ducks and geese by placing a long tube down the birds' oesophagus and pumping an excessive quantity of food directly into their stomach. As a result the liver swells to six to ten times its normal size. Force-feeding leads to 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.

The force-feeding procedure involves holding a bird by the neck, drawing the animal towards the feeding pipe, which is approximately 20-30 cm in length, thrusting it down the bird's throat and pushing mashed maize and fat into the bird's oesophagus.

At the first force-feeding, 180g of food is forced into a duck, and by the last feeding, the amount is increased to 450g. This takes 45-60 seconds using a motorised or hand operated auger, or 2-3 seconds using a pneumatic pump. This is rather like a person of 70 kg being forced to eat 7 kg of pasta in just a few seconds. This quantity of mash, injected twice daily, is much more food than ducks eat voluntarily. This corn-based feed is also nutritionally incomplete for such waterfowl and is intended to impair liver function.

Foie gras producers first begin to force feed birds at around 12 weeks of age, with ducks usually force-fed twice daily for 12-15 days and geese three times daily for 15-21 days.

Foie gras producers only use the male ducks. The female ducklings are surplus to requirements and are generally killed by maceration soon after birth.

Foie gras production detrimental to animal welfare

Scientific research shows that force-feeding birds to produce foie gras is a major animal welfare problem. Already in 1998, the EU's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) concluded that "force feeding, as currently practised, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds". In 2002, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) stated 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."

The SCAHAW report concluded that, as a result of force-feeding, normal liver structure and function "is severely altered and compromised". The enlarged liver 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 are more likely to suffer from bone fractures, liver lesions and respiratory disorders.



Moreover, the SCAHAW report concluded that mortality in force-fed birds is 10 to 20 times higher than in non-force-fed birds. A report by the French industry states that 4.3% of the birds die during force feeding; this amounts to 1.5 million dying each year during this inhumane process.

Force-feeding does not replicate natural behaviour

Defenders of foie gras argue that force-feeding replicates a natural behaviour of wild fowl. Ducks and geese increase their food intake before migration in order to produce fat to fuel their long flights. However, wild ducks and geese undergo a very specific set of annual physiological adaptations triggered by changes in day length in order to adjust for increased fat metabolism at this time. Moreover, birds do not eat the huge meals typical of force feeding as they assimilate energy reserves for migratory flights; rather, they eat many small meals throughout the day. Further, the Muscovy duck, from which most ducks raised for foie gras are derived, does not migrate. Besides this, in migrating birds, fat is not stored in the liver (as is the case in force-feeding), but instead synthesised in the organ and stored in adipose fat and muscles. Force-feeding is therefore not analogous to the behaviour of pre-migratory birds.

Illegality of foie gras production

Given the harm caused by force-feeding, foie gras production has already been banned in various countries worldwide either expressly or because it is deemed to violate national anti-cruelty laws. These countries include Argentina, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. It is also banned in California.

Most force-fed ducks are kept in individual battery cages in France. These have been illegal since January 2011 under the 1999 Recommendation on ducks of the Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes. The European Commission has confirmed that this provision is binding in EU law. Despite this, most foie gras farmers flout the law and continue to keep ducks in individual cages.

Force feeding is arguably illegal under EU law. Council Directive 98/58 (the General Farm Animals Directive) provides that "No animal shall be provided with food or liquid in a manner ... which may cause unnecessary suffering or injury" (paragraph 14 of the Annex). Force-feeding clearly causes suffering and injury.

The SCAHAW report highlighted the potentially damaging and distressing effects of the insertion of the feeding tube into the oesophagus. This can result in accumulated scar tissue in, and serious injury to, the oesophagus of ducks. In particular, insertion of the tube can result in inflammation of the bird's neck, and bruising and even perforation of the oesophagus.

What MEPs can do

Please ask Commissioner Dalli to:

- Press the French authorities to ensure that foie gras producers comply with the ban on keeping ducks in individual cages
- Ensure that the Member States enforce the EU legislation that in effect bans force-feeding - explain to the Commissioner that force feeding contravenes Directive 98/58, Annex, paragraph 14 which prohibits the provision of food "in a manner ... which may cause unnecessary suffering or injury"
- Include species-specific provisions on the welfare of ducks and geese in the Animal Welfare Framework Law that he plans to propose in 2014.