

## Foie Gras and Hypocrisy on California's Menus



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It's only mid-January and we've got our first food controversy. California's fooderati are cheering both the uncaging of laying hens and the force-feeding of ducks as if there's no contradiction in supporting the two.

On January 1, a new law went into effect in California that has been universally celebrated by people who care where their food comes from and how it was raised. The law requires that all shell eggs sold in my home state have to come from farms that comply with voter-passed Proposition 2's animal-welfare standard, which essentially bans battery cages for California's 15 million egg-laying hens -- as well as for countless others belonging to companies that want to sell eggs here. Stacked several feet high, these cages pack chickens wing-to-wing, requiring each bird to spend her entire life on less space than a sheet of paper. When I saw them firsthand as a member of the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, the sight and the stench were horrifying.

Just a week later, though, a federal judge overturned the 2012 California law banning the sale of foiegras, the fatty liver of force-fed ducks or geese. That news was followed by a celebration of a different sort: chefs in the Bay Area and Los Angeles -- some very well-known -- taking to Twitter and the airwaves to rejoice that they could put foiegras back on their menus. Some bragged that they had never taken it off.

This contradiction puzzles me. Actually, it makes me furious. Just because something happens to be delicious should not mean that it gets a pass when it comes to ethics.

As the founder and CEO of a food service company that employs hundreds of chefs and serves 200 million meals per year, I believe those of us who are in a position to drive food trends through our influence and purchasing have a responsibility to be consistent in our values, so that we can help consumers be.

Surveys show that consumers don't like thinking the animals they choose to eat spent their entire lives suffering. When polled, the vast majority state that humane animal treatment is important to them. This is not a trend confined to California, or a new one. An [Oklahoma State University](#) national study in 2007 found that 95% of consumers believe that "It is important that farm animals are well cared for." [In an April 2014 poll \(PDF\)](#) by Consumer Reports, 80 percent of respondents said that better living conditions for farm animals were important or very important to them.

Foiegras is an expensive delicacy that few people have ever even tried. I am pretty sure the epicureans celebrating the return of force-fed goose and duck liver are the same ones asking if their eggs are pasture-raised and their beef grass-finished. Those who would defend foiegras say that ducks and geese will gorge themselves naturally -- force feeding only extends that habit. I've heard feedlot operators argue the same thing about hormone-dosed cattle eating grains to the point of obesity. [Others argue](#) that foiegras is such a tiny industry, we shouldn't make a big deal out of it and concentrate instead on the nation's 44 million hogs, 12.6 billion cattle, and 3.5 billion broiler chickens.

We can -- and should -- do both. The bottom line is that foiegras comes from abused animals. Pretending otherwise is just a fantasy.

My company switched to cage-free shell eggs in 2005, banned foiegras (and veal from crated calves) in 2012, and has committed to switching to pork raised without the cruel practice of gestation crates by the end of this year. We're far from perfect, but we are trying hard to educate our guests and encourage an increased supply of humanely raised meat and eggs.

Chefs can drive supply and demand -- and they can turn it off if they try. Remember Chilean sea bass, that mild, flaky white fish that was hard to overcook and that Americans loved almost to extinction? Chefs led the way in weaning their guests from it so the fisheries could recover, by offering alternative fish they might not have been exposed to.

Paté doesn't have to come from force-fed ducks or geese. There's nothing wrong with liver itself: eating organ meats is part of many cultures, including my Italian family's, and part of a sustainable meat industry.

I challenge chefs and other culinary taste-makers to resist serving foiegras even if the law now permits it. Let's help consumers be consistent with their ethics even if means forgoing something far more delicious than battery-cage eggs.

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