



Farm animals

Information

June 2008

Foie Gras Production

What is foie gras?

Foie gras means 'fat liver', a product based on the livers of force-fed ducks or geese and used to produce foodstuffs such as pâté de foie gras. Foie gras has been traditionally produced using special breeds of geese that have been bred to produce particularly fatty livers but, nowadays, male 'mulard' (mule) ducks are predominantly used. Mulard ducks are created by crossing male muscovy ducks with female domestic ducks, often through artificial insemination. These hybrid ducks are used because muscovy ducks reportedly become too nervous during the force-feeding procedure, whereas domestic ducks, although easier to handle, cannot ingest enough food, and do not produce livers with a high enough fat content.

Which countries produce foie gras?

The main producers are France (around 790 thousand geese and 18 million ducks reared for foie gras each year), Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain and Belgium. Foie gras is not produced in the UK, and would be illegal under animal welfare laws due to the welfare problems involved and the unnatural nature of the feeding technique. The same is true for Holland, South Africa, Sweden and Switzerland. Force-feeding was explicitly banned in Israel in 2005 and is also illegal in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway and Poland. The sale of foie gras products is also currently prohibited in Israel, and the City of Chicago (US).

How is foie gras produced?

Prior to force feeding, birds are typically kept in buildings on straw bedding and allowed access to a grassy outdoor area. The feeding regime is designed to enlarge the birds' oesophaguses ready for the force feeding, for example by gradually reducing the availability of food to only a single, large meal over a short period each day to encourage the birds to gorge themselves. During the final weeks before force-feeding the birds are kept inside for longer and longer periods to ready them for the restrictive housing to follow.

Force-feeding begins when the birds are around 12 weeks of age and occurs for periods of approximately 12 to 15 days prior to slaughter for ducks and 15 to 21 days prior to slaughter for geese. During this time the birds are usually force-fed 2 or 3 times daily. For force-feeding to occur, the birds have first to be restrained. During the force-feeding period, the majority of ducks (around 80%) are therefore kept individually in small, wire or plastic cages with the head protruding through an opening in the front, so that the neck is easy to grasp. Geese and a minority of ducks are kept in groups in small pens, in which case it is necessary to catch each individual prior to force-feeding. During the force-feeding, a person grasps the bird by the neck and inserts the pipe down its oesophagus (a process known as 'gavage'). A large quantity of mashed maize and fat is then delivered directly into the lower oesophagus over a period of around 45 to 60 seconds using either a motorised or hand operated auger, or for 2 to 3 seconds using a pneumatic pump.

What are the RSPCA's views?

The RSPCA is opposed to the production of foie gras due to the many serious welfare problems it causes for the birds involved. Force-feeding prevents birds from carrying out their normal feeding behaviour, and the pipe used can damage the birds' throats and oesophagus. The handling involved during force-feeding can

also be stressful; observations of behaviour have shown that, given the chance, some birds will try to escape from the person who force-feeds them when they see him/her coming to carry out the next feed.

Due to the force-feeding, the birds' livers may become 6 to 10 times the normal size, with liver function impaired. Studies comparing the mortality rates of force-fed birds with normally-fed birds have shown that death rates can be 10 to 20 times higher in the force-fed birds during the two weeks prior to slaughter. This greatly elevated mortality rate is possibly due to the compromised liver function, an increased incidence of bone fractures, damage to the oropharynx, and/or the stress caused by the force-feeding process.

In addition, the RSPCA has major concerns about the keeping of birds in small, individual wire cages. These do not allow the birds to stand, walk, preen or stretch their wings properly, and do not allow access to water for the birds to carry out water-related activities such as preening.

The Society would urge all retailers not to stock foie gras, and would also press all restaurants and other food retailers not to have it on their menus. In 2001, the RSPCA, along with other welfare organisations, alerted a UK retailer to the welfare issues surrounding the production of pate de foie gras they were selling. Based on the information supplied, the retailer decided to stop selling the product.

What can you do to improve the welfare of birds reared for foie gras?

Improving EU laws to protect farm animals, whilst very important, can be a slow and often frustrating process. You as a consumer, on the other hand, have enormous power to bring about more rapid change to cease foie gras production.

If you find foie gras for sale in a supermarket or restaurant, please do not buy the product, but write to the retailer's head office, or speak to the restaurant manager, expressing your concerns and asking them not to stock it.

You can also write to:

Commissioner Markos Kyprianou
European Commission for Health & Consumer Protection
Commission of the European Union
200 Rue de le Loi
1049 BRUSSELS
Belgium (a first class stamp will do)

Commissioner Kyprianou is responsible for food safety, public health, consumers' rights and animal welfare in the EU. Tell him of your concerns and ask him to introduce better animal welfare legislation to effectively prohibit foie gras production.

Useful publications

European Commission's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (1998): Welfare Aspects of the Production of Foie Gras in Ducks and Geese: The report highlights many welfare problems associated with the production system, and concludes that "force-feeding, as currently practised, is detrimental to the welfare of the birds."

Council of Europe Standing Committee of the European Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes (1999): Recommendations Concerning Domestic Geese, Muscovy Ducks, Domestic Ducks and their Crossbreeds: In these recommendations, the Committee points out that it is "aware of the welfare problems connected to certain practices in the production of foie gras which do not meet the requirements of the Convention."



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