

Foie Gras and Leadership Don't Mix

Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc. (RPA), understands the U.S. cannot be a leader in compassion as long as its leaders consume the most cruelly produced foods. There is no question that foie gras tops that list – it is made from a cruel process that can only be rationalized by those who value profit over all humane values. Officials, business leaders, food vendors, event planners, educators, and other influential Americans must refuse foie gras, avoid supporting the foie gras industry, and inform others of the cruelty of foie gras production if they are to be credible leaders in compassion.

What Is Foie Gras? ε Described by the late Sir John Gielgud as “an abomination that every humane individual must reject as a disgrace in civilized society,” “foie gras” means fatty liver. It is the swollen, diseased, malfunctioning liver of a duck or goose, enlarged up to 10 times normal size in the living animal through repeated force-feedings and sold as a “gourmet” item after the animal is slaughtered.

How Is Foie Gras Produced? ε Two-to-five times a day for 14 to 28 consecutive days, workers at foie gras factory farms shove hard metal or plastic pipes down the throats and into the stomachs of ducks or geese, pumping into the birds’ stomachs a massive quantity of a nutritionally unbalanced corn mix. There is no other way to produce foie gras. This repeated force-feeding destroys the birds’ metabolism, turning their normal three-ounce, deep mahogany-colored livers into 1.5-pound pale beige masses. In their last days, the birds suffer visibly. Many can barely move and have trouble breathing. Some die before their scheduled slaughter from the devastating effects of repeated force-feeding. Workers break surviving birds’ necks and cut them open to remove their grotesquely enlarged livers. Foie gras companies sell the fatty livers to restaurants, gourmet stores, and distributors.

What Do the Experts Say? ε A large number of veterinarians licensed in New York State, where most U.S. foie gras is produced, signed a statement that ducks or geese force-fed by the foie gras industry are “sick and suffering”; that “foie gras production, by definition, constitutes clear-cut animal cruelty”; and that, in the living animal, foie gras is the painful liver disease hepatic lipidosis – fatty liver disease. The vets reached their conclusions after examining photographs, blood tests, biopsies, and necropsies of ducks who had undergone the force-feeding process. After extensive observation of a foie gras company, Dr. Tatty Hodge wrote that from force-feeding, ducks are “suffering from liver disease and esophagitis and are clinically ill. Any practice which has as its goal the production of a diseased and suffering animal is inhumane” Many waterfowl experts have reached similar conclusions about foie gras production. Only those with a personal career interest in condoning foie gras production have claimed to disagree.

Where Have Officials Done the Right Thing? ε In Austria, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, foie gras production is prohibited by law due to the cruelty involved. Some of those countries have outright bans; others consider foie gras production a violation of their anticruelty laws. In Israel, the world’s third-largest foie gras producer, the Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that force-feeding geese to make foie gras is cruel; the practice should be banned or more humane regulations should be established; the change must take effect by 2005; and force-feeding animals is inherently inhumane, so the Court knows of no way for foie gras production to be made humane.

In New York State, where most U.S. foie gras is produced, many legislators signed on to bills introduced in the 1990s to prohibit foie gras production following public exposure of the industry's cruelty. A legislator in California, the other foie gras-producing state, introduced a similar bill.

Where Have Officials Done the Wrong Thing? ε The most extensive U.S. foie gras industry investigations to date occurred in 1991- 92 at the headquarters of the largest New York producer, Commonwealth Enterprises (AGY Corp. does business as Commonwealth Enterprises, Hudson Valley Foie Gras, New York State Foie Gras, and Ferme de Gourmand, D'Artagnan), and in 2003 at California's Sonoma Foie Gras. In 1992, New York state police charged Commonwealth Enterprises with cruelty to animals in response to overwhelming evidence, including detailed affidavits of experienced veterinarians who accompanied troopers on their raid. The assistant district attorney who reviewed the evidence agreed the case was strong.

After charges were filed, the district attorney, threatened by agribusiness interests, appointed an "expert" panel to review the charges. The panel excluded veterinarians and others who had documented the birds' suffering and included a Commonwealth Enterprises founder, a veterinarian who had helped the company's bottom line rather than the animals, and others whose reputations were on the line. Not only did the D.A. drop the charges based on the panel's predetermined recommendation; he had the case file sealed so the public could not learn how these maneuverings had corrupted the legal process and the rule of law.

Following the Sonoma Foie Gras investigation, authorities failed to charge the company with cruelty to animals despite overwhelming evidence. The company sued animal advocates, and animal advocates sued the company for perpetrating cruelty to animals. The lawsuits had not been resolved at the time this factsheet was prepared. Officials', extension agents', and other influential people's complicity keeps alive the U.S. foie gras industry and the indignation against it that caring people naturally feel and express.

Can Compassion and Rule of Law Overcome Greed? ε Several major restaurants and airlines have agreed to stop serving foie gras due to the cruelty involved in producing it. The Smithsonian Associates, the Tanglewood Wine and Food Classic, and other organizations have cancelled foie gras promotional events. Dr. Howard M. Shapiro warns, under "The Delicacy with a Diagnosis" in his book *Picture Perfect Weight Loss*, that foie gras "may be the only food that is actually a disease" and that a 3.5-ounce slice of foie gras contains an alarming 240 milligrams of cholesterol and 70 grams of fat. Humane organizations throughout the world inform people of the horror of foie gras production. But the horror continues. Elected officials, law-enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and other influential people must choose to release defenseless ducks and geese from torture chambers forever.

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*** Note: The agriculture extension services of Cornell University and University of California Davis serve the foie gras industry. The trust that millions of people place in universities to practice and teach humane ethics is misplaced when it comes to animal agriculture. The land-grant universities for decades have assisted the cruel, polluting, wasteful, unhealthful, unsafe factory farming of chickens, turkeys, pigs, and other animals - including ducks and geese force-fed for foie gras. RPA's 10,000 Years Is Enough campaign aims to end universities' teaching of animal agriculture.**

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Responsible Policies for Animals, Inc., a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit organization, works to show influential people how to establish responsible policies for animals that are also responsible policies for people and ecosystems.