

Feeding Frenzy

Live octopus.
Lamb's tongue.
Adventurous eaters
will go to any
lengths to devour
the strangest
dishes on earth

BY LIZ JOHNSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER MURPHY

At Su San Seafood, a Korean restaurant in Flushing, Queens, a group sits at a table, hesitantly holding chopsticks above a platter of live octopus.

It is moving.

While they are deciding how to approach eating it, the tentacles jump up and attach themselves to the chopsticks.

Really.

The group is part of an adventurous eaters club called the Gastronomers. But even for them, watching a meal jump from plate to fork was a new—and unnerving—experience.

“Everybody was thinking, ‘OK, I’m going to go in,’” Carlijn Urlings, one of the members, tells me later. “But you didn’t have to go in. It would just jump up and stick.”

If that isn’t enough to give you the willies, consider how Gastronomers cofounder Curtiss Calleo described on his website what happened next: “Slimy, writhing octopus tentacles attaching themselves to your esophagus as you try to swallow.”

Yikes!

The Gastronomers—this chapter is based in New York, but there’s another in Boston—are interested in the culture of exotic food, so you can expect to find some shocking items on their dinner plates. But a lot of what they eat is probably not all that shocking in itself—at least not anymore. We’ve

seen contestants on *Survivor* survive by eating bugs and worms, and we’ve seen contestants on *Fear Factor* eat worse than that. Andrew Zimmern, host of *Bizarre Foods* on Travel Channel, has made a career out of eating such delicacies as brain tacos and bull penis soup. And Anthony Bourdain, host of *No Reservations*, also on Travel Channel, is known for eating “the nasty bits”—every part of the animal, from nose to tail. One of the grossest examples? Hákarl: fermented shark meat.

It’s not as if we all aspire to extreme eating. But in the past decade or so even some of the most demure eaters have been desensitized. We’re becoming a little more adventurous—and it shows on our plates.

The reasons? Partly the media. Nothing like a few bull penises and some fermented shark meat to make you think the bone marrow at the local bistro is nothing out of the ordinary. But it’s also our new, smaller world. We travel, we go online, we see how other countries and cultures eat. After a trip to Scotland, haggis—heart, liver and kidneys all ground up with oats and stuffed into a stomach lining—doesn’t sound all that horrible.

And we get used to things. Think how much has changed just since the late 1990s. Mario Batali, a fledgling star on Food Network, had just opened Babbo, his Italian restaurant in Manhattan,



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The New York
chapter of the
Gastronauts
gathered in
March for an
adventurous
meal at Public
restaurant.



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and diners were surprised to find dishes made with oxtail, lamb's tongue and beef cheeks. Around the same time, Gabrielle Hamilton, the chef-owner of Prune in the East Village, who is today making the rounds with her new memoir *Blood, Bones & Butter* (Random House, 2011), put roasted bone marrow on her menu. Saying you'd tried it was a badge of honor, and it became a gateway drug for beginning adventurous eaters.

Today, however, it's not uncommon to see people sitting down to a meal of pig's feet—with the sweetbreads to start. You have to get pretty serious to give people the shivers. Like tongues, brains or heart. But I've found them, even in the suburbs.

The Road to Adventure

I used to be a picky eater. Among the things I wouldn't eat: lamb, olives, blue cheese and sushi. (Forgive me. I was young.)

So how did I find myself, 7,000 miles from home in the dusty Australian outback, eating an enormous ant—its legs still squirming—and proudly telling my friend it tasted like lime juice?

"One of the reasons people do it is that they want to talk about it," says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., author of the

book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think* (Bantam, 2006) and professor and director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab in Ithaca, N.Y. "It is something you want to share with other people—not to brag, but to tell other people what happened. In the same way, it's a safer form of skydiving. It's a safer way of thrill seeking."

According to Wansink, it makes sense that I—and lots of other people—eat exotic things while on vacation, for instance, "where people are going to do something different from their routine. You want to be able to say, 'Hey, I did something cool.'"

Like trying rabbit in Italy. Or alligator in New Orleans.

It's saying something about our newfound quest for adventure that just last year *The Cookery*, a little Italian restaurant in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.—a bedroom community not high on the destination list for extreme eaters—got its customers really excited about trying duck tongues and bone marrow.

"You have to have enough confidence to do it and feel good about it," says David DiBari, the chef-owner. "If you convey the energy to them, they feel it, and they love it."

Gastronauts: A Bloody Dinner at Public

The Gastronomers, an adventurous eaters club based in New York, celebrated its fifth anniversary in March with a dinner featuring blood in every course. Chef Brad Farmerie of Public restaurant in Manhattan, created this menu. He says, very seriously: "It was probably a little easier than it would be for most chefs because I've taken interest in blood as an ingredient." No—he's not a vampire, just a bit of a world traveler. "I lived in England for a while, so I fell in love with black pudding and boudin noir."

This, from a chef who doesn't have a chicken or salmon dish on his menu. He prefers game and more interesting meats: even his ravioli filling is made with snail and oxtail.

"I'm always looking to do something different," he says. "So for this, I was grabbing some of our greatest 'blood' hits and augmenting that with a few new ideas."

This is what he came up with:

- Smoked Coconut Laksa with Beef Blood Tofu
- House Cured Trout, Coconut Labne and Swedish Pig's Blood Bread
- Pig Blood Popsicles, Chili Jam and Toasted Peanuts
- Boudin Noir, Poached Egg and Sherry-Braised Onion
- Black Pudding Pie with Pear Chutney
- Horse Blood Brûlée
- Blood Velvet Cake with Foie Gras and White Chocolate Icing



In other words, they trust him. “I developed a real confidence in Dave, and I knew that if he was going to give me something, it was going to be good,” says Matt Cohen, a regular at The Cookery. “I walk in there and say, ‘What’s good tonight?’ And sometimes it’s pig’s tail.”

Or pig’s heart.

No, I didn’t try that at The Cookery, though I did try DiBari’s calf’s brains ravioli. (Good. Rich and buttery.)

The pig’s heart was several years back. I was standing on the stone patio of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, the farm-to-table restaurant on former Rockefeller property in the Hudson Valley, overlooking abundant fields of summer vegetables. Fergus Henderson, a famous British chef known for nose-to-tail cooking at his London restaurant, St. John, was the guest for the evening. The pig’s heart came as a canapé, thin slices balancing on a lettuce leaf. I was nervous, but I trusted. And it was really quite delicious.

Blood Simple

Sometimes, though, even the most adventurous eaters can get squeamish. In March, the Gastronomists club was celebrating its fifth anniversary with a

menu prepared by Michelin-starred chef Brad Farmerie at Public in Manhattan. Every course featured blood: pig’s blood, horse’s blood, cow’s blood.

Sarah Spigelman, who writes the blog *Fritos and Foie Gras*, was a little nervous about one of the dishes. “I think I’m a big carnivore, but pig’s blood popsicle is out of my comfort zone,” she said. “I’m more of a rare steak kind of lady.”

Even Gastronomists founder Calleo admits that sometimes the dishes can be too much. The Filipino dish balut—a fertilized egg with an embryo inside—is pretty gnarly, I have to say. That was the only time anyone ever ran outside,” he says. “One time. That’s it.”

The Gastronomists have tried horse meat. “Mild, like beef,” says Allyson Mabry of Brooklyn. They’ve tried cod milt, aka sperm. “I love cod sperm,” says Lauren Seebacher of Ossining, N.Y. And they’ve tried yak meat. “Very chewy and sinewy,” says Scot Henry of Manhattan. “But it’s interesting to see how people make do with what they have.”

“I like the fact that you eat your food and you know where it comes from,” says Urlings, the club member who described the live octopus. “You don’t eat the fillet of fish; you actually see the fish and you



On the Gastronomists’ menu, boudin noir, poached egg and sherry-braised onion.



A bloody good meal was had by all.

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know that that's what you're eating. I like the wholeness of that idea. You eat meat and you eat fish, and at some point you have to realize that there's an animal behind what you're eating."

Not too long ago we were a lot more connected to what we ate. When Sonny D'Angelo's grandfather opened D'Angelo Bros. butcher shop in Philadelphia 101 years ago, organ meats—offal, as it's known—were common. Offal fell out of favor, but, says D'Angelo, it's now back.

"It's kind of snowballed in the last year or two, since Andrew Zimmern and Anthony Bourdain have been on the Travel Channel eating worms and octopus noses and stuff," he says dryly. "Before, it was more or less a cultural thing, where people would eat a certain way because that's what they grew up eating. Not any longer."

His favorite game meat is antelope.

"It's a nice texture," he says. "It tastes like veal but smells like gardenias." (D'Angelo raises 2,000 orchids in a greenhouse in his backyard in his spare time.)

The shop stocks everything from sheep's heads and rattlesnake to kidneys and, yes, pig's hearts. "Now veal cheeks are an avant-garde item," he says. "Before, they were a giveaway. Not any longer, that's for sure."

Another change: nutria—a swamp rat popular in the Louisiana bayou. It's not exported wholesale anymore, but he can get just about anything else.

"If it's commercially available and legal, I have it or I can get it," he says. Popular these days? Wild boar, lardo and guanciale, which is cured pork jowl. Food that people tried in Italy—on vacation.

"The fun thing about New York," says Calleo, "is that it's all here. It's such a rich, rich place in terms of culture and food that you often don't need to travel to find it."

And these days, with so much enthusiasm for adventure on the plate, that could be said about a lot of places, whether big cities, suburbs or rural towns, and whether you're looking for pig's heart, duck tongues or even blood.

And as for that blood—the pig's blood popsicle, especially—well?

"It's bloody good," says Calleo.

"That's what you want me to say, isn't it?"

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