



## The Argument for Lab-Grown Foie Gras and Its Place on Your Plate

The first time I had foie gras was in France, and it was such a life changing experience that even a decade later, I still remember it distinctly.

It was in a nondescript bistro in Paris, somewhere in Montmartre in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. I was exhausted after a whole morning of sightseeing and wanted nothing more than to collapse into literally any of the wicker chairs that lined the sidewalks and have a glass of wine and maybe some bread. But my travel companion had other plans, and urged me to keep going. We crossed street after street, and just when I was about to stand my ground and insist on the nearest café in my line of sight, we arrived.

I was tired and grumpy. The bistro looked exactly like any of the dozens we had passed along the way – surely it wasn't *that* special? My friend was grinning knowingly, and ordered a carafe of white wine to placate me. She jabbered quickly (as the French do) with the waiter, but my basic French caught none of it apart from "*pain*" (bread) and "*foie gras*". The famous foie gras! My irritation melted away like butter on a pan. It was something I'd always wanted to try, but for some reason, never got around to doing so in Singapore. My friend explained that the bistro we were in was famous for its foie gras, specially imported from Gascony, a region in France where the best foie gras in the world is produced. The famed liver can be served in a few ways – sliced whole and pan seared, whipped and condensed into a block and served cold, or combined with other ingredients like pork, duck or veal and made into a spreadable paste. Today, we were going to try it in its whole form and despite not usually being a fan of innards, I was excited.

It arrived on a wooden platter with a few pieces of perfectly crisp bread and caramelized figs. My friend gently layered a piece of bread with a small slab of liver, and topped it with the tiniest sliver of fig and fed it to me. Over the years, I've tried to find the right words to describe that moment, and I think the closest I've come to is "transcendent".

If you can stomach the fact that it's liver, you have to admit that foie gras is pretty perfect. It's rich, fatty, salty and is a great appetizer or main course *and* complements a great number of dishes.

The only problem with foie gras? The way it's produced.

## **The ugly truth behind foie gras**

If you don't already know, I'm going to go ahead and say it's pretty horrifying. Briefly, ducks or geese are forced fed grain and fat in a process known as 'gavage'. This process causes the birds' liver to swell up to a shocking *10 times their normal size*, leaving many of these birds unable to walk or even move. The production of foie gras (which literally translated to 'fatty liver'), is seen by many as unethical due to the torturous process the animals are put through in order to develop the fatty liver we so prize. On top of that, the living conditions of these animals aren't cushy either – you've seen the videos. If you haven't, think hundreds of ducks or geese crammed into cages just slightly bigger than them, forced to drink out of murky troughs, some even bleeding from their nostrils from mishandling.

But all animal agriculture is inherently cruel, you argue. Ok, maybe foie gras production is crueler than usual, but how else is the world going to get its fix of this fatty delicacy that's been around for centuries?

## **A cruelty-free alternative?**

Enter start ups like GOURMEY that acknowledges that since there is no way to convince the world to stop eating foie gras – they'll just have to find a more ethical solution, and luckily for us, they're well on their way to making cruelty-free foie gras a thing.

Created in 2019, the Paris-based start up was started by friends Nicholas Morin-Forest, Jerome Caron, Antoine Davydoff and Gemma Lyons. GOURMEY uses cellular agriculture to actually *grow* foie gras using the cells extracted from a duck egg. You may have heard of this process before with GOOD Meat, the lab-grown cultured chicken meat company that made recent headlines for being the first cultured meat product to be sold in restaurants.

The process sounds fairly straightforward: the cells are placed in a cultivator that provides them with the ideal growing environment, allowing them to "grow" into a piece of liver that perfectly mimics the taste, texture composition as regular foie gras. Not only does this process completely eliminate any animal suffering, it also requires 80% less water, land surface and carbon dioxide emissions compared to conventional farming.

With a growing number of countries outright banning foie gras, and an increase in animal welfare support, GOURMEY has certainly entered the market with the right time. Backed by Big Idea Ventures, an alternative-protein VC, the start up hopes to be able to release its product in 2023 or 2024.

## **Are consumers ready?**

As with the case of GOOD Meat, the question is, are consumers ready to accept lab-cultivated meat? According to an Australian study, 72% of those surveyed were not ready to accept cultured meat, and earlier research has indicated that Europeans were likely to have an even lower acceptance rate. These figures are disheartening, but we must remember that this is relatively new technology and as with all things new, will require time and education before it becomes widely accepted. Take plant-based proteins for example – it wasn't until recent years that we started seeing these meat alternatives on menus everywhere due to a boom in demand.

I'm not the same girl who tried foie gras all those years ago. I now follow a mostly plant-based diet and I try to eat as little meat as possible. So I'm all for lab-cultivated foie gras, chicken, fish – you name it. For those who are squeamish about lab-cultivated meat, I invite you to watch videos of slaughterhouses. I challenge you to tell me which is harder to swallow – a piece of meat grown in a vat, or a cow that had to suffer for the entirety of its life before becoming that piece of meat you are about to eat. As a society, we have become so far removed from the process of animal agriculture because the meat we buy in the supermarket looks nothing like its original form. This has desensitized if not, enabled us to turn a blind eye to the horrors animals have to endure so that we can get our meat fix. This is not right, and fortunately as technology advances and paves the way forward, might one day be a thing of the past.

## **Science meets fine dining**

Eventually, lab grown meat will become more commonplace and make its way into dining rooms around the world, casual and exclusive. I foresee some critics arguing that lab-cultivated meat having no place in fine dining, because with fine dining, only the best cuts are presented to diners, which also justifies part of the expensive prices.

But what if we looked at it in different way? What if we changed the narrative where the premium isn't about the cut or quality of meat, since technology will allow us to mimic even the finest A5-grade wagyu, but becomes about the creativity and the skills of the chef, and rewards the innovativeness of start ups like GOURMEY that will hopefully by then, have turned the traditional farm-to-fork supply chain on its head. We need to convince diners that lab-cultivated meat is more than just about protecting animal welfare – it is about preserving our environment and by extension, our future as a species.

I can't imagine something more worth paying for.