

CHOW TIME

I'm cooking supper on this rainy day, a rare occurrence, and it got me thinking about food.

There's no denying it, we eat weird stuff. I'm not alluding to what I'm cooking for dinner, or the likes of "Fear Factor" on TV, where they eat live stink beetles, live cockroaches, and drink milkshakes made of soured milk and pigs intestines. These repulsive things are eaten on a dare, so to speak. The contestants receive a large sum of money if they can keep these things down the hatch. Here I'm talking about things we eat with apparent gustatory delight.

Last month, John Jackson waxed eloquent on the oyster. I like oysters, too, but I like quahogs better because they're not quite as slimy. In a book all about oysters (available at the Ann Farwell Library), William K. Brooks, a nineteenth century pioneer in the study of oysters says, "If the oyster is opened carefully, the diner is eating an animal with a working brain, a stomach, intestines, liver, and a still beating heart. As for the 'liquor', that watery essence of oyster flavour that all good food writers caution to save, it is mostly oyster blood." The book also states that in the early days of the nineteenth century, oysters a foot long could be harvested. That's one big oyster, and it seems to me it would have to be cut up before eating it. William Makepeace Thackeray complained that eating oysters a foot long was like "eating a baby", though how he could possibly know that I wouldn't want to speculate.

The Koreans eat live baby octopus. It is served with a plate of "soju", which is really alcohol. You grab the living octopus and wipe him in the plate of soju which apparently puts him to sleep and then you down him in a gulp. I have no idea what he does when he wakes up to do battle with ones gastric juices, and I don't want to know.

So here we are eating live things, with still beating hearts, drinking their blood, and still we complain that other people, other cultures, have disgusting eating habits. There is, of course, the option of not eating meat. In Switzerland, there's a group called "Viva La Vacca" (Long Live the Cow). To make their point, they have installed a cow and a calf in a pasture. The cow is not required to give milk and the animals will not go to the slaughterhouse. This seems a little unfair to me, for humans are now forced to work cutting hay, providing vitamins, and calling the vet, while the cow lives the life of a queen, doing no useful work. It's one thing to forbear eating animals, it's quite another to enslave yourself to them.

In the fowl category, deep-fried turkey is quite popular. This is a whole turkey, immersed in boiling fat in a special cooker, like a big French fry. I had the dubious pleasure of sampling this delight when on a hunting trip. I had brought with me a Canada Goose which my neighbour

had shot, and we deep fried him, after the turkey. Not so good, to my mind, as the turkey and goose were a little greasy. I think had the meal not been preceded by a quantity of beer, the birds would have tasted far worse. If the goose had migrated from James Bay to Smith's Bay, I believe he walked it because he was sure tough.

Then there's turducken. A deboned turkey stuffed with a deboned duck which, in turn, is stuffed with a deboned chicken. A bored chef must have prepared the first turducken just to prove it could be done. Listen up, Harvest Restaurant. I once went to a Chinese restaurant for dim sum with a native of Hong Kong. One of the items she suggested we sample was chicken feet. I signed on because I thought chicken feet was just a name for something, like chicken breasts shaped like feet, but by golly, it was the feet of chickens. Yellow, scaly things with claws which for all the life of the chicken must have been wading around in chicken manure. One gnawed the fatty pads off the bottom of the feet. Ungood.

I have to mention a Dutch treat called "Patatje Oorlog", which is fried potato chips with mayonnaise, ketchup, onions and peanut sauce. It is said when you eat this "War breaks out in your stomach". I just bet it does, but if patatje oorlog will do it, so will poutine.

Finally, in the category of good food made

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