Torture in a tin: Viva! foie-gras fact sheet
(updated July 2015)

Foie-gras (French for "fat liver") is "the liver of a duck or a goose that has been specially fattened by gavage". Gavage is the process of force-feeding birds more food than they would eat in the wild, and much more than they would voluntarily eat. Feed is usually corn boiled with fat, which deposits large amounts of fat in the liver. This process essentially causes a disease of the liver (hepatic steatosis), which would invariably be fatal if the birds were not slaughtered.

The majority of the 44 million birds used in foie-gras production in France each year are ducks (98.3 per cent), with geese making up the remainder.

Force-feeding

The force-feeding of birds, that are often confined and with no means of escape, is both cruel and damaging to their health. Feed is administered using a funnel fitted with a long tube, forcing it into the bird’s oesophagus. Modern systems use a tube fed by a pneumatic or hydraulic pump. Force-feeding can cause violent trauma to the bird’s oesophagus, which can lead to death. Around a million birds die during force-feeding in France every year, with mortality rates 20 times higher than those reared normally. Force-feeding also causes the liver to swell to up to ten times its natural size, impaired liver function, expansion of the abdomen making it difficult for birds to walk, death if the force feeding is continued, and scarring of the oesophagus.

Typically, birds will be free-range prior to force-feeding. Geese are not caged in foie-gras production, but 87 per cent of ducks are confined to individual small wire cages not much bigger than their bodies, where only their heads are free to facilitate force feeding. Despite these cages being banned in 2011, France has continued their use and intends to do so until the end of 2015 (they are gradually being replaced with group cages that are hardly an improvement). The remainder – and most geese – are enclosed in small enclosures (pens). Only male ducklings are used in French foie-gras production (as they put on weight quicker and their livers are less veinous); almost all females are killed at just a day or two old by either being gassed or thrown alive into industrial macerators (as many as 43 million annually). Both sexes of geese are used in foie-gras production.

Ducks are force-fed twice a day for 12.5 days and geese three times a day for around 17 days. Ducks are typically slaughtered at 100 days and geese at 112 days.

The Trade

France is the leading foie-gras producing country, with 72 per cent of world production. Foie-gras is also produced in Hungary, Bulgaria, the United States, Canada and China. In 2014, France produced 19,300 tonnes of foie-gras. Production has more than doubled since 1994. World estimated total production is around 26,600 tonnes.

Despite moves in Europe to ban it, gavage is now protected by French law as part of their cultural and gastronomic "heritage". Foie-gras cannot be sold as French unless it is the result of force-feeding. Foie-gras production is banned in several countries, including most of the Austrian provinces, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland and Israel. General animal protection laws in Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom mean that production is essentially banned there also. In 2012, 8 MEPs called for foie-gras to banned across Europe.
184.5 tonnes of foie-gras was imported into the UK in 2014 (up from 127 tonnes in 2006). The UK still consumes more French foie-gras than Germany, more than twice as much as Italy and nearly five times more than Holland. However, the true figure of animal product imported because of this trade is likely to be much higher, as this statistic does not include duck/goose meat, goose fat or other by-products. Most foie-gras in the UK is sold by restaurants, bistros and pubs. Through campaigning by groups such as Viva!, no major supermarket chain currently sells foie-gras in Britain.

An Ethical Alternative?

Some French producers – including intensive ones – claim to be 'artisan'. This term is meaningless, as there is no official definition of 'artisan foie-gras'. All birds will have been force-fed in France.

Some producers outside of France are now claiming that they are producing so-called 'ethical' foie-gras. Whilst this does not include force-feeding, geese are tricked into over-eating ahead of a migration they will never make. This type of production is miniscule and hugely expensive.

A Ban in the UK: Achievable?

Despite the production of foie-gras being banned in many European countries the sale of foie-gras is not prohibited. This makes a mockery of existing animal welfare legislation in the UK, by allowing a product to be sold here that would be illegal to produce here. 63 per cent of Brits have said in a 2012 Mori poll that they would like to see foie-gras banned in the UK.

Several councils in the UK, including York, Bath and Bolton, have banned the use of foie-gras in council properties. Whilst they do not have the power to stop establishments selling foie-gras, this is an important move which shows official disapproval.

WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules are often quoted as the reason why a ban on the importation of foie-gras into the UK would not be possible. However, there are clauses which allow countries to ban imports on the grounds that 'public morals' or 'animal health' are threatened. In 2014, a WTO appeals panel upheld the EU ban on imports of seal products because of the 'public morals' clause. It is hoped this opens the door for a ban on the importation of foie-gras into Britain.

Viva!'s Campaign for a Foie-gras Free Britain

Viva! has printed nearly a million leaflets to raise awareness about the cruelty of foie-gras. Using undercover footage our campaign has made front pages in papers in Britain and across Europe. We have launched campaigns to persuade celebrity chefs to change – and in 2015 Heston Blumenthal dropped foie-gras from his menus. Through targeted media and peaceful demonstrations, campaigning by Viva! has persuaded supermarket chain Lidl and wholesalers Makro, as well as Amazon – the world’s largest online retailer – to stop selling foie-gras in the UK.

Viva!’s short film, The Wonderful World of Gavage, ‘spoofs’ the false assurances of the French foie-gras industry. Viva! promotes going vegan as the best way to end animal suffering.

Viva!

For a referenced and expanded version of this factsheet and for information on how you can get involved in the campaign to make Britain foie-gras free visit www.viva.org.uk/foiegras or phone 0117 944 1000.