

Torture in a tin: Viva! foie-gras fact sheet

(updated July 2014)

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 38 million birds used in *foie-gras* production in France each year are ducks (97.5 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 them 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 38 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 78.5 per cent of world production. *Foie-gras* is also produced in Hungary (8 per cent), Bulgaria (6 per cent), the United States (1.4 per cent), Canada (1 per cent) and China (0.6 per cent). In 2012, France produced 18,750 tonnes of *foie-gras*. Production has doubled since 1994.

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, Israel and since 2012 California (in a move spearheaded by Viva!). 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 be banned across Europe.

191.5 tonnes of *foie-gras* was imported into the UK in 2012 (of the top six EU importers outside of France the UK was the only country to increase imports). The UK consumes more French *foie-gras* than Germany, twice as much as Italy and four 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 over half a million leaflets to raise awareness about the cruelty of *foie-gras* production in the past seven years. Our 2013 undercover footage with L214 exposed conditions on *foie-gras* farms in France and made front pages in papers in Britain and across the Europe. 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.



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

