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The Foie Gras Wars: How a 5,000-Year-Old Delicacy Inspired the World's Fiercest Food Fight
Mark Caro
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009
368 pp. \$25.00 (cloth)

Ten years ago I smuggled foie gras *into* France. I was helping to prepare a luncheon to celebrate the international cookbook award my coauthors and I had received for *Foie Gras...A Passion*. Joining me were Michael Ginor, the principal author of the book and co-owner of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, and Jean-Louis Palladin, a celebrated French chef working in the United States, who hailed from the duck-fat-rich region of Gascony. As a matter of gastro-patriotic pride, we wanted to use Hudson Valley's duck livers for our meal. Palladin considered them among the finest in the world.

Ginor's assistant and I left with the fattened lobes two days early so that if anything happened at the border there would still be time to try to get additional American foie gras into the country. We lined an ordinary suitcase with Styrofoam, loaded it with ice packs, and arranged ten grade A livers—almost twenty pounds—inside. Nervous but exhilarated, I checked the bag at JFK airport, trying to relax by pretending the bag was full of socks and underwear. Or maybe rocks.

Our arrival in France was uneventful. At Charles de Gaulle airport no one was interested in what we were carrying (this was before 9/11). We loaded our bags into a cab and headed directly to the back door of the Michelin three-star restaurant Alain Ducasse, where we had made arrangements to store the livers until we needed them. The French cooks were incredulous and dismissive. They

suggested we were lying or misled about the livers' provenance. They carted them to their walk-in cooler with a hmpf.

Our luncheon was a success, even though the journalists and chefs who attended were bemused by the American foie gras. "What do Americans know about this French delicacy?" they asked. The truth was, not much.

Fast forward a decade, and foie gras has made front-page news across the country as animal rights activists, Hollywood celebrities, and state and municipal governments rally to ban the production and/or consumption of these pricey fattened livers. Coalitions of chefs and other constituencies of foie gras lovers and personal freedom fighters have reacted by organizing in resistance. By most measures, Americans, even those who spend all of their waking days either protesting against or petitioning for foie gras, still don't know much about this ancient delicacy.

They should all read Mark Caro's book.

To be honest, I picked up *The Foie Gras Wars* reluctantly. After my immersion in foie gras culture during the years I worked on our book and the time I have spent with chefs and with Ginor (whom I consider a close friend), I felt there was little left to learn. Granted, most of my exposure had come from the pro foie gras camp. I have toured foie gras farms, both in the United States and abroad, and confronted protestors head-on at readings and cooking demonstrations for the book. But after finishing Caro's highly readable and entertaining book, I felt I better understood both the issues and the individuals behind the American foie gras story.

An entertainment reporter with the *Chicago Tribune*, Caro approaches the foie gras story like an extended magazine article, weaving profiles of important players with detailed accounts of events. He combines thorough reporting with a sense of humor and does so without disrespecting the gravity of the ethics of animal husbandry and abuse at the core of the issue—which is not to say that he doesn't set up the reader to laugh at many of the ignorant statements and outlandish stunts proffered by people on both sides

of the protest lines. Simply stating the name of one of the strongest anti-foie-gras groups, Hugs for Puppies (now The Humane League of Philadelphia), conveys a lot without having to editorialize. Still, Caro is a sympathetic, respectful narrator with an ear for the emotional resonance of his subjects and his readers.

Caro began his research as a foie gras neophyte. He stumbled on the topic of duck liver in 2005, when the *Tribune's* restaurant critic, Phil Vettel, suggested he write about two eminent Chicago chefs who were warring about the ethical nature of foie gras. Claiming not to have been influenced by animal rights activism, Charlie Trotter weighed the evidence and quietly chose not to serve foie gras at his eponymous restaurant (despite having once been among Hudson Valley Foie Gras's best customers). Rick Tramonto, then executive chef and co-owner of Tru, considered Trotter's posture hypocritical. "I think certain farms treat animals better than others. Either you eat animals or you don't eat animals," he told Caro (p.8). When Caro confronted Trotter with Tramonto's opinion, on the record, Trotter called Tramonto an idiot and other names and suggested his own fat liver should be served up for dinner. And that was even before Chicago's city council voted to ban the sale of foie gras in restaurants. Caro knew he was on to a good story.

As a result of Caro's unexpected entry into the food world, one of the charms of the book is that he brings his readers along on his learning journey about foie gras. (He also brings us along to his doctor visits to document how his cholesterol rises during his research. This *Super Size Me*-style personalization of the story is Caro's only device that doesn't work.) Perhaps because of his experience writing about celebrities, Caro's strength lies in conveying the personalities behind the foie gras issue. As I read, I could hear the impassioned speeches and thick accents of Izzy Yanay, Ginor's Israeli partner in Hudson Valley Foie Gras, and Ariane Daguin, the French owner of D'Artagnan, the country's largest foie gras distributor. With equal reportorial aplomb he captures

Ginor's philosophical ambivalence about the ethics of foie gras production and the boredom of municipal government meetings. I can only surmise that the other players I haven't met are rendered with similar accuracy.

Although it is difficult to say, given my proclivity to eat meat and the rarified food world I inhabit, I imagine that Caro's effective application of the old journalistic saw that it is better to show than to tell means that people on both sides of the foie gras issue will take what they want from this book. Because the focus of the book is the Chicago ban, which is repealed in the end, and because Caro eats enough foie gras while conducting his research to spike his cholesterol sixty points, it is easy to conclude that he is not opposed to foie gras production or consumption, at least as he has witnessed it. But that does not mean he consumes without guilt or ambivalence. Caro concludes his lengthy acknowledgments by thanking the "billions of animals that feed most of us. Without them, the world food system wouldn't exist in its current form. How much this is a positive or negative thing, I leave to you" (p.335).

Another talented writer with a different predisposition could no doubt use the same evidence to write a very different book. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* comes to mind. But Caro's book is not an ethical tract; rather it is a journalist account of a set of events that have ethical ramifications. It should be required reading for American gourmets and animal rights activists alike.

—Mitchell Davis, James Beard Foundation

Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook

English translation with Introduction and Glossary
by Nawal Nasrallah

Leiden, Neth. and Boston: Brill, 2007

xii + 876 pp. Illustrations. \$195.00 (cloth)

(Brill Series in Islamic History and Civilization, 70)

Although medieval Baghdad was a place of great diversity and rich cultural production, few Western nonspecialists would be able to give specific examples of the actual contents of this heritage. Nawal Nasrallah's impressive translation of the tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook by Ibn-Sayyar al-Warraq provides a valuable resource for understanding medieval Baghdadi culture through culinary tradition.

Even a cursory glance at the volume shows that "culinary tradition" has a vast definition in the context of medieval Baghdad. In addition to the more familiar territory of

recipes and ingredients, food for the medieval consumer automatically suggested medicine, philosophy, and art. Nasrallah's translation, aided by Brill's first-rate presentation, shows how these different components are connected and helps the reader see the diverse contextual elements that would have gone into the creation of a cookbook in the tenth century in Baghdad. In her introduction Nasrallah explains the manuscript culture of the text as well as the sources and legacy of Ibn al-Warraq. She then contextualizes the concept of food culture in medieval Baghdad and offers the reader key points for understanding Abbasid Baghdadi cuisine. She next outlines a crucial concept related to food in the Middle Ages: the humors that govern man's health and temperament, and the remedying properties of food for balancing and adjusting humoral problems. After this helpful contextual information Nasrallah presents her translation of Ibn-Warraq's text.

The translation is elegant and accessible. Where deemed relevant, the original Arabic terminology is included, making the text doubly interesting for those who know Arabic and who might wish to double-check or enrich their food lexicon. Footnotes are used carefully to clarify doubts related to the manuscript and to give further information on ingredients, medical beliefs, or cultural practices. The actual recipes take up pages 65 to 520, and like all good cookbooks, invite the reader either to peruse at random or to study specifics. These recipes also showcase the characteristic medieval sensitivity to intertextuality: many are taken from other oral or written sources (and credited), emphasizing the range of recipe ideas available to Al-Warraq.

Of special interest is the fact that, with some adjustments, many of the recipes are perfectly feasible for today's Western kitchen. If some ingredients or recipes such as wild ass (p.241), bustard (p.307), or kid stuffed with truffles (p.366) may not be that simple to manage for many of us, there are dozens that invite an attempt. I tried and loved the *wast mashtur* (p.151)—the open-faced sandwich slathered in walnut oil, heated, served with egg yolk of soft-boiled eggs—though I had to skip the required condiment of fermented sauce. The sandwich even boasts its own poem by the Abbasid Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi, which adds to the delight of eating it. It is indeed easy to imagine trying one of the cold poultry dishes (chapter 31), some of the dips and sauces (chapter 34), or perhaps a variety of nougat (chapter 104). The same is true of the omelet and scrambled egg dishes of chapter 79; the first of these, the "white omelet," calls for ground pistachio, almond, and walnut, and could be the star course at a healthy brunch. At all times Nasrallah is careful to footnote the recipes with many