

In Its Busy Season, Foie Gras Battles Its Image Problem



FAMILY BUSINESS Joël Cabannes raises ducks and geese for foie gras on a farm in Mugron, France.

Photographs by Daniel Velez/Agence France-Presse, for The New York Times

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

MUGRON, France

IN a gaggle of about 30 squat ducks on Joël Cabannes's farm, two geese stand out for their erect bodies, long necks and incessant honking.

"Ducks tend to be quiet, so the geese honk if a fox is coming, or some other threat," Mr. Cabannes said, explaining their presence. "Like the geese on the Capitol," he added, alluding to the sacred geese whose honking is said to have saved ancient Rome from the invading Gauls.

Mr. Cabannes, slight and boyish at 35, said his great-great grandfather began producing foie gras commercially on this farm in 1933. Now he occasionally feels he needs more than cackling geese to keep the dangers at bay.

Farmers like Mr. Cabannes produce foie gras by a process called gavage: force-feeding grain to ducks or geese several times a day through

a pipe that is inserted in their throats, causing their livers to grow many times their normal size within weeks.

"Ducks are like people — if they're all stressed out, it's not good," he said, pointing to grassy fields used as

Amid scattered bans, the avian flu looms.

exercise grounds for the ducks whose livers, fattened with corn, will be sold across France as foie gras. On grassy fields, he said, "there are fewer parasites and bacteria than in mud." To underline the care shown by his family for its livestock, he shows a photo of his grandmother, now 80, as a young girl, cradling a goose almost as a musician would a cello and stroking its long neck while feeding it corn grains.

Foie gras producers are feeling

pressured just as their biggest season is upon them. Strains of bird flu have been discovered in Asia that could move west to infect European fowl. This fall, one of France's biggest foie gras producers, the Euralis group, acquired a Bulgarian foie gras producer just as bird flu was found in neighboring Romania.

Moreover, a wave of new laws is sweeping the world banning the making, and sometimes the consumption, of foie gras. Two of France's biggest neighbors, Germany and Italy, have banned its production; the European Union has asked the industry to explore whether there are not more humane ways of producing foie gras. In September, Israel became the latest country to outlaw its manufacture, after its supreme court declared last year that it violated animal protection laws.

Last year, California banned the production and sale of foie gras after 2012 and legislation regulating it has been introduced in New York, Illinois, Massachusetts and Oregon.

The anti-foie gras wave has reached France, too.

"It's the sole product in which you force an animal to eat," said Sébastien Arsac, 32, an employee of an animal rights organization who volunteers at Stopgavage.com, a Web site that opposes foie gras. "The paradox is that people who are otherwise very attached to animals often see nothing wrong with eating foie gras."

Farmers like Mr. Cabannes decided to strike back. Lobbying in Paris, the foie gras industry in October convinced the national assembly, the lower house of parliament, to declare foie gras a "cultural and gastronomic patrimony protected in France" in an effort to shield it from the animal rights movement. To be against foie gras, the decree seemed to say, was to be against France.

France's anti-foie gras activists, like the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, started by the former actress to promote the humane treatment of animals, denounced the decree. In a statement, it called gavage "true torture for geese and ducks" and appealed to the French not to eat it. The decree must still pass the senate, or upper house, where four senators from the Greens party have introduced a bill to block it.

None of this has cost much ground for the French farmers, especially at this time of year, during the holiday season, when 70 percent of French foie gras is consumed. The farmers produce about 17,500 tons of foie gras a year, roughly 75 percent of the world total, generating about 1.5 billion euros of revenue, and providing jobs for about 130,000 people.

In a good year, Mr. Cabannes said, his ducks produce 2,000 tons of cooked foie gras, at about 100 euros a kilogram, or 2.2 pounds. He admits readily that his ducks, after 18 weeks of gavage, weigh roughly six times what they do at the start. Yet he insists that his ducks are not mistreated.

"It's the duck who decides the pace," he said as he led a visitor through his barns. "In one hour we do five ducks," he said, while the biggest industrial producers, he said, could manage 1,500 to 1,600 in an hour. "It's not the quantity that counts," he said, "it's the work well done that counts."

François Lacroix-Dubarry does not like to consider himself an industrial-scale producer of foie gras. Still, the sprawling factory that his family owns in the town of Gimont, population 2,500, processes about 200,000 birds a year — a fraction of what industrial farms do. About 82 percent of them are ducks, the rest geese.

"The geese has a more subtle flavor," he said, adding that many of his

Protecting the livers as a French heritage.

customers in Spain and Italy prefer goose to duck foie gras.

Mr. Lacroix-Dubarry's company, Comtesse du Barry, which his family began in 1908, has about 25 farmers who do the gavage and slaughter the birds, while the 70 workers in his factories, uniformly clad in white smocks and gloves with white hairnets on their heads, cut up the birds, separate the parts and package the foie gras.

The factory produces about 160 tons of meat annually, including the foie gras, generating about 35 million euros of revenue.

Mr. Lacroix-Dubarry, a stoutly built man of 63, ships no foie gras to the United States and was dismissive of legislative efforts there to ban foie gras.

Told of the law passed in California, he paused, then replied: "They can eat prunes."

Europe, he said, cannot ban foie gras because France has declared it an ancestral patrimony, and indeed laws in other European countries ban merely the production, not the import or consumption of foie gras.

As for Brigitte Bardot, he said, "She only visited the industrial-scale

producers."

No one can accuse Pierre Plassard of industrial-scale farming. On his small farm in the Dordogne region he specializes in goose foie gras and boasts that against the 35 million ducks that are slaughtered each year in France for foie gras, only 800,000 geese go under the knife.

On a recent afternoon, four women in white smocks and hairnets, one of them his wife, Annick, were carving up the remains of 30 geese that had been slaughtered that morning. Mr. Plassard purchases the young goslings from other farmers but does the feeding and fattening and slaughtering himself.

But while a fattened duck liver averages only 150 grams, that of a goose averages 850.

Mr. Plassard's grandparents were butchers who also sold packaged products like foie gras. He originally raised cattle, but finding it unprofitable, switched to foie gras, though he still leases acreage to keep some beef cattle.

Over a lunch of duck and goose foie gras with truffles and roast goose breast for a main course, Mr. Plassard passes review on all the developments buffeting the industry.

"There's such uncertainty, with new laws in Israel and the United States, and the humane societies and Brigitte Bardot," he said. He paused, picked at his foie gras, and said hesitatingly, "I'm not an executioner, am I?"



THE END RESULT A whole duck foie gras, from Joël Cabannes.