OPULENCE ON TRIAL

As jurisdictions around the world ban foie gras, Ontario’s chefs strive for a way to source it ethically – or opt out entirely.

WORDS BY KATE DINGWALL
EVEN THE TITANIC’S FINAL DINNER SERVED FOIE GRAS, BAKED EN CROUTE

an infringement on the craft. “Everything I grew up reading or researching in my education — it always comes back to foie gras, as a delicacy or in a classic recipe,” recalls Boutin’s Nicholas Truslen.

Other chefs simply find it redundant. Roger Yang, owner of Aref, has never seen the draw and is appalled at the process, though he does offer that mock “luxe-gras” versions made of mushrooms and herbs on his bar menu. “We can get the same kind of texture, the same kind of experience without actually using foie.”

Roman and Greek gourmands ate it. Roman Jews ate it — the product met kosher dietary laws. Louis XIV and his Sun Court fawned over the ingredient, and the French upper crust followed his lead. With that, foie gras solidified its home on high-end menus across the globe, where it has resided ever since. (Even the Titanic’s final dinner included foie gras, baked en croute and sprinkled in a snowfall of truffles.)

Scholars think that in ancient times, the birds weren’t force-fed wild geese and ducks would chub up, sticking fur to their liver and doubling their weight, before migrating. Egyptians learned to domesticate geese and waterfowl, greatly hand-feeding them — a process we now know as gavage — with local figs to replicate the natural gorging.

With industrialization, force-feeding got less personal. Hands were replaced with
merchandising feeding tubs. Fruits were replaced with low-cost grain mashes. It was no longer a seasonal ingredient. Birds were fed earlier in life, and slaughtered at a young age, usually just 100 days old.

Today, the process is astonishing: ducks are forced for a 28-day feeding regimen that swells the liver up to 20 times its original size.

"It's unnatural - you have to make a bird die," explains Adele Byrne, associate director of PETA. "Animal activists liken it to cockfighting or dogfighting - cruel and archaic.

Why are people so enamored? How can foie gras be so beloved? It is hard to believe that the practice could be considered humane, but it is, and many chefs and restaurateurs are quick to point out the benefits.

"People believe that foie gras' high price tag means birds are raised in exemplary conditions," explains Byrne. "This is not the case. Foie gras is often force-fed, and the birds are kept in small, dark, and cramped conditions."

Investigations have shown that these conditions lead to stress and poor health, which can affect the quality of the final product. But these claims are not always backed by evidence, and many chefs and restaurants continue to support the practice, citing tradition and taste as their reasons.

"I like foie gras because it's a luxury item," says Chef John Besh of Commander's Palace in New Orleans. "It's a special treat that adds an extra layer of flavor to a dish.

But not all chefs share this view. Some, like Chef David Chang of Momofuku in New York, have spoken out against the practice, calling it "inhumane and unethical."

"It's a cruel and inhumane practice," Chang said in an interview. "I believe in using animals humanely and responsibly, and I don't think forcing birds to be unhealthy and suffering is acceptable."

In the end, the decision to use foie gras or not is up to the individual chef and restaurant. Some choose to source foie gras from sustainable sources, while others opt for alternative ingredients. But for many, the allure of the luxury item and the resulting flavor profile is too great to ignore.

"Foie gras is a special treat that adds an extra layer of flavor to a dish," says Chef John Besh of Commander's Palace in New Orleans. "It's a luxury item that I can't live without."