



AT TABLE

# EXOTIC FEASTS

The price we pay to eat rare foods—  
and those on the edge of extinction.

BY BRUCE PALLING

**T**he telephone call from a friend was unexpected: Would I come to Paris to eat ortolan, the tiny songbirds that are drowned in Armagnac and consumed, beaks and all, under a large napkin (some say to enhance the aroma, others say to avoid being observed by God).

In France, it is illegal to sell ortolan but not to consume them, and as I was to be the guest of a famous Michelin three-star chef, I was happy to oblige. Half a dozen of us gathered in his restaurant's private dining room and were presented with a variety of small birds. They were eaten whole—

including bones—and had a livery flavor since they were cooked with their innards inside. The only disappointment was that they were in fact thrushes and larks, as on this occasion no ortolan could be found, even at the inflated price of \$200 each.

The whole event got me thinking of the issue of forbidden food, especially in light of the California foie gras debate, the latest chapter of which was resolved this winter. After a decade of arguments, protests, and court cases, foie gras is legally back on the state's menus. That will

hardly be the end of this contentious story, with animal-rights campaigners accusing producers of torture (many believe that producing foie gras by forcibly feeding ducks or geese to enlarge their livers to be a cruel act). Chef Sean Chaney of Hot's Kitchen, in Hermosa Beach, fought the ban for two-and-a-half years and was "ecstatic," he says, when it was overturned. He now sells more than 20 pounds a week in such dishes as seared foie gras on a burger. Chris Cosentino, owner of Cockscomb, in San Francisco, is an advocate of nose-to-tail eating, including foie gras. "It was always a minority that wanted it taken off the menu and a majority who wanted it on, so now it sells like gangbusters," he says.

**W**ith ortolan, too, the controversy is more to do with their method of death than with their rarity, as there are estimated to be millions of breeding pairs in Europe and more than 50 million around the globe. Chef Alain Ducasse even has recipes for them in his *Culinary Encyclopedia* and regularly lobbies for them to be allowed to be sold in restaurants.

Others are more conflicted, like chef Daniel Boulud, who told me that the morality of eating ortolan is the wrong question. "The moral should be: If you can catch it, you should eat it because there is nothing worse than catching something and not honoring it," he says. "I don't know where to get them anymore, but if someone presented one to me on a plate, I wouldn't care to eat it. I had the opportunity once, and I will live with the memory of its taste. Morally, I care more about sustainability."

Eating forbidden food is hardly a new phenomenon—after all, Eve started the whole thing with her Garden of Eden apple. Many objections are irrational, but that doesn't lessen passions. The main considerations are whether or not it is an endangered species, if the creatures appear to suffer in order to enhance their

taste, or if they are animals that some humans feel affection toward, such as dogs.

The question of suffering is also the reason that foie gras prompts so much opposition. Many food experts question how cruel it is as the birds show no signs of distress when they

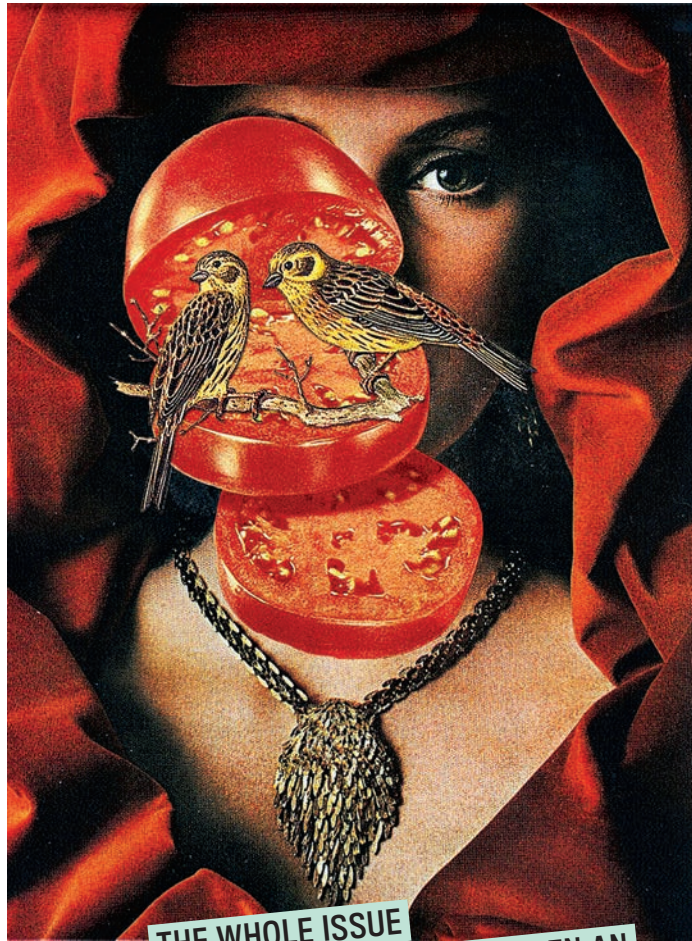
dorsal fin is hacked off before the animal is thrown back overboard to die a slow and painful death. Exact figures are hard to come by, but it is estimated that more than 70 million sharks are killed annually to service the demand, with half of the fins ending up in Hong Kong restaurants. Hotel chains such as the Mandarin Oriental Group have removed shark-fin soup from menus, in their case since 2012, but several shark-species populations continue to plummet. Perhaps consumption would be more understandable if the fins had an interesting taste; however, even regular consumers admit that it is more the slippery, slimy texture that people appreciate.

One of the most endangered species of them all is the pangolin, a shy, scaly anteater nearing extinction because of its role in Chinese medicine. More than 100,000 of these inoffensive creatures are estimated to be killed annually to feed demand in China and Vietnam, where the scales can cost up to \$1,400 per pound. Consumption is supposed to offer benefits ranging from a cure for cancer to the eradication of impotence. However, it is nonsensical: The scales are made of keratin, the main component of human hair and nails. Their flesh is considered a delicacy, but those who have tried it say it is virtually tasteless.

The whole issue becomes complicated when an endangered food actually tastes superb, which is the case with bluefin tuna. A large specimen of this magnificent predator once sold for more than \$1.7 million in Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, though prices

earlier this year appeared to have eased. This won't help save the species though, as stocks are a mere 10 percent of what they were 20 years ago, and governments seem unwilling to set severe reductions in the catch of wild tuna. There are growing numbers of successful tuna farmers, though the flavor of their fish does not yet rival that of the wild version.

Sturgeon caviar, another luxury, is no longer viable from its traditional home in the Caspian



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are being fed large meals, even when funnels are put in their throats to facilitate the process. Paul Levy, coauthor of *The Official Foodie Handbook*, has long been a foie gras supporter. He dismisses opponents as being out of date: "Most of the propaganda and the accompanying photographs of cruelty to the ducks or geese are generations old and falsified," he says.

Other delicacies, such as shark-fin soup, popular in Asia, are obviously cruel. The shark's

Sea, and countries like the U.S. have banned and restricted its importation. Harvesting the roe from female sturgeons results in their death, while poaching and pollution have also played a part in their near demise. In the early 1980s, an estimated 3,000 tons of wild caviar was harvested annually from around the Caspian Sea, mainly by Iran and the Soviet Union. This amount dropped by more than 90 percent before producers realized it was too late to revive natural production to meet the demand. Farmed alternatives in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean were negligible in the 1990s, but now more than 250 tons are produced each year, with a yield that's expected to more than double before the decade's end. Farmed caviar is slowly gaining acceptance among consumers, with real progress being made in its quality.

**A** new breed of chefs in Nordic Europe has emerged in the past decade that cooks with hard to find ingredients, some of which may be considered endangered. René Redzepi, of Noma, in Copenhagen, serves sea urchins found in Norway above the Arctic Circle. In this case, they are harvested by a single diver who takes his job of conserving stocks very seriously, so there is little danger of them becoming depleted.

James Lowe, chef at Lyle's in London and formerly of The Fat Duck, likes searching the English countryside for wild produce, including ramps, which have a brief spring season. Some conservationists object to people uprooting them for their edible bulbs. "It is questionable if foragers really endanger produce like this," Lowe says. However he does have concerns about gulls' eggs, a delicacy sold for only a few weeks in April. England's production is tightly controlled, with just a handful of harvesting licenses given out, but more eggs seem to be available. "When I started cooking them ten years ago, it was always difficult to find them," Lowe says. "But now there are so many, they are actually available at discounted prices, which makes me suspicious."

Overall, the prospects of people refraining from forbidden foods are not high. For many devotees, the rarity or expense factor only makes consumption more alluring. Perhaps civilized behavior is not really the issue. Elisabeth Luard, the author of *Sacred Food* thinks we are all kidding ourselves: "It is only when we have got enough sustenance that we can afford to be moral about what we eat," she says. "It all goes back to practicality rather than morality." ♦

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CHECKING IN

BALTIMORE LUXE

A thoughtfully restored mansion-turned-hotel opens in the city's Mount Vernon neighborhood, just north of downtown.

There isn't anything else in the city, or the state of Maryland, of this caliber. Baltimore may not know it yet, but they are ready for it," says David Garrett. He's talking about **The Ivy, the city's new 18-room hotel in an 1889 mansion**, where he is managing director. Discretion is paramount from arrival, when guests are escorted to the observatory for Laurent Perrier champagne. Past the Mansion Bar and Tea Room is a check-in desk. There's no lobby. "We're welcoming you into a private home," Garrett says.

Four years ago, two Baltimore families bought the former home of William Painter, inventor of the bottle cap, and brought on Garrett and his wife, Christie, to open a hotel. Every historic detail was restored (one woodworker spent nearly three years just carving 107 staircase spindles) under the watchful eye of interior designer Joszi Meskan. Ten trailers of antiques were rescued from the Inn at National Hall, in Westport, Connecticut, after it closed in 2010. Local artists and Maryland Institute College of Art students painted 18 armoires to be stocked as "barmoires" with Melville Pinot Noir and Stumptown coffee. But where The Ivy really shines are the nine suites. Book Suite One (\$995) for its pink octagonal sitting area and garden terrace or Suite Seven (\$1,295) in the mansion's turret. Guests pay extra only at the spa and at Magdalena, the hotel's bistro, helmed by chef Mark Levy. 205 E. Biddle St.; 443-503-4501; [theivybaltimore.com](http://theivybaltimore.com). — Elizabeth Sile



The Ivy's Tea Room, left; Suite Seven's bathroom.

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LOOKING THE PART

KAUAI-INSPIRED SURF GEAR

Hawaii's St. Regis Princeville Resort and fashion-designer Heidi Merrick partner on a new beachwear collection.



When Los Angeles-based fashion designer and avid surfer Heidi Merrick first visited Hawaii's St. Regis Princeville Resort three years ago, she was genuinely transfixed by the Kauai resort's Hanalei Bay. To Heidi, the daughter of legendary surfboard-maker Al Merrick, the half-moon-shaped beach was Mecca. **"The influence of Hanalei Bay on surfing is profound," she says. So she decided to pay homage to it by putting its picture on a rash guard she designed** as part of her **St. Regis Princeville Resort beachwear line**, debuting this month. "I wanted to capture the beauty and spirit of Kauai, and showcasing the unforgettable view from the resort immediately came to mind as a way to do that," she says. The rash guard features horizontal stripes, clean lines, and a crew neck, all of which are typical Merrick design elements. *Women's rash guard, \$230; children's rash guard, \$160; [heidimerrick.com](http://heidimerrick.com).* — J.F.

Heidi Merrick's rash guard for the St. Regis Princeville Resort.

FROM TOP: COURTESY THE IVY HOTEL (2); COURTESY THE ST. REGIS PRINCEVILLE RESORT