

CHAPTER 1

What Can We Learn from Liver?

*I*n the summer of 2003, animal rights activists targeted the Santa Rosa, California home of Didier Jaubert, a French-born lawyer and entrepreneur, and his American wife, Leslie. Their house was splashed with red paint, the locks on the house and garage doors filled with glue, and “murderer” and “stop or be stopped” spray-painted on the house and car. Jaubert was a partner in a soon-to-open business venture called Sonoma Saveurs, a specialty shop and café, located in a historic adobe building on the plaza in downtown Sonoma. The café would feature a variety of locally made artisan food items, including foie gras. The day after the vandalism, an anonymous poster on an animal rights website called BiteBack wrote, “We cannot let this restaurant open . . . Jaubert needs to hear that people will not tolerate this atrocity.”

Jaubert’s business partners were Laurent Manrique, the French-born corporate executive chef of the Aqua Restaurant Group in San Francisco, and Guillermo and Junny Gonzalez, the owners of Sonoma Foie Gras. Two nights after the attack on Jaubert’s home, Manrique’s Marin County home was vandalized in a similar way by “concerned citizens,” as they were called on BiteBack, which also posted the two men’s home addresses. Red paint was thrown at his house, paint thinner splashed on his car, the garage door and car locks sealed with glue, and the words “murderer,” “torturer,” and “go back to France” spray-painted on his property. The next day, Manrique found a videotape in his mailbox. The video was shot from the bushes in his front yard and showed him in his living room playing with his toddler son. An unsigned note was taped

to the video. It read that that his family was being watched and demanded “stop the foie gras, or you will be stopped.”

Two weeks later, activists broke into Sonoma Saveurs and caused an estimated \$50,000 worth of damage to the historic building. They covered walls, appliances, and fixtures with red paint and graffiti (“foie gras = death,” “end animal torture,” “shame,” “go home,” and “misery”). They poured concrete down the drains where sinks and toilets were going to be installed. Then they turned on the water, flooding the building as well as its neighbors, a jewelry store housed in another historic nineteenth-century building and a women’s clothing store. A gloating account of the attack was posted soon afterward on BiteBack. The tactic of pouring concrete represented “the forcing of high density feed down the throats of ducks. The damage this will do to the plumbing symbolizes the damage done to the ducks’ digestive systems by force feeding them.” Additionally, the flooding would “punish” Guillermo Gonzalez for “depriving the ducks he tortures to make foie gras of water in which to preen and bathe.” The post continued, “Now Guillermo will be sure to have a swim when he opens the door.”¹

No one directly claimed responsibility for these acts, and no arrests were made. After adjusting the business plan and menu and forsaking the original logo of a smiling duck, Sonoma Saveurs opened later that year,² but closed soon after.³ The Sonoma County police chief described the attacks to reporters as a “sophisticated campaign of domestic terrorism.” Upon the advice of local law enforcement, Manrique installed a security system at his home. “I came to America because it is the land of free speech,” he told a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. “But all of this, involving my family like this, is going way too far.”⁴ Manrique left the venture soon after receiving the videotape, citing obligations to his restaurants in San Francisco. Jaubert, too, called foie gras part of his cultural tradition and pleaded for more reasonable forms of protest than vigilantism. As he told the *Sonoma News*:

If you don’t like foie gras, I can understand. If you don’t want foie gras to be sold, you can demonstrate in front of the store, you can write letters to the editor. But to destroy a historical building, to

attack a family's home, to do this at night and to be proud of your actions—this is very difficult for me to understand.⁵

WHO CARES ABOUT FOIE GRAS?

This event, and those that followed elsewhere in California and around the country, centered on a particularly contentious food item—foie gras (pronounced fwah-grah). This specially enlarged “fat liver” of a goose or duck is a popular food in French cuisine and one that animal rights supporters find morally repugnant. The debate centers on how foie gras is made. To enlarge and fatten the liver, the goose or duck is fed measured and increasing amounts of grain (typically corn and/or a mash of corn and soy) through a specialized tube or pipe during its last weeks of life. This process is called *gavage* in French, which most easily translates into English as force-feeding, and the person doing the feeding is the *gaveur* (if a man) or *gaveuse* (if a woman). During the gavage period, which ranges between twelve and twenty-one days depending on the farm, the bird's liver grows six to ten times in size and increases from approximately eighteen percent to up to sixty percent fat by weight. A duck foie gras averages about 1.5 to 2 pounds (compared to about four ounces for a non-force-fed liver). Gavage and its product, foie gras, are alternatively acclaimed and reviled by different parties.

Renowned culinary historian Silvano Serventi writes that foie gras is “synonymous with pleasure of the senses.”⁶ As a dish, it is typically served as a small-portioned first course. It can be eaten hot as a quickly seared preparation, often accompanied by a sweet fruit garnish. More traditionally, it is slowly cooked over low heat and then served cold as a *pâté* or *terrine*. It is silky in texture and rich and unique in flavor. Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain once called foie gras “one of the most delicious things on the planet, and one of the ten most important flavors in gastronomy.”⁷

While a fairly new delicacy in the United States, foie gras is a food of global origins and has long been considered a symbol of luxury and prestige. Ancient historians have traced practices of domesticating and fattening waterfowl for their livers back to ancient Egypt; papyrus

scrolls and stone reliefs, including two that hang in the Louvre museum in Paris, depict the process of moistening grain to feed to geese through hollow reeds.⁸ These practices traveled throughout eastern and southern Europe (where sizable foie gras industries still exist in Hungary and Bulgaria) and took hold in France, where foie gras has played a leading role in the country's world-famous culinary canon for over two hundred years.⁹ There, until the mid-twentieth century, foie gras—made mostly from geese, but also from ducks—was primarily a seasonal food (harvested in autumn) that was reserved for fine dining restaurants and families' special occasions, especially at Christmas and for celebrating the New Year.

Following World War II and with state-financed support, French foie gras production (like that of other types of food and agricultural products across Western Europe and North America) became industrialized, enabling year-round production, lowering costs, and encouraging new consumer demand. Alongside foie gras's industrialization came substantive changes to the product itself. Most notably, the industry switched from using primarily geese to ducks due to the latter's better ability to cope with new mechanized (and more cost-effective) feeding methods. Today, while foie gras is a small piece of the panoply of French agriculture, it is a €1.9 billion industry (about \$2.2 billion in 2014 dollars). Eighty percent of the world's foie gras production and ninety percent of world consumption occur in France. According to national estimates, the total industry includes around fifteen thousand farms and six hundred processing facilities, ranging from small family-run businesses to national commercial firms. The French foie gras industry employs about thirty thousand people and indirectly affects about one hundred thousand other jobs in areas such as veterinary practice, retail sales, marketing, and tourism.

For consumers, foie gras is a mainstay of France's culinary landscape, always available at specialty shops, supermarkets, prepared food *traiteurs*, chain stores, and outdoor markets, as well as online. Restaurants from nondescript corner bistros to Michelin-starred gastronomic temples feature it on their menus. Yet, despite the widespread use of language and imagery proclaiming its authentic ties to tradition and history, these days most foie gras in France comes from a modern and

industrial production model that is largely hidden in plain sight. Several firms control the large majority of the market, sell under different brand names, and take pains to downplay their commercial motives to the public.

In the late twentieth century, parallel to its industry's modernization, foie gras became increasingly viewed as an endangered asset in France's cultural treasury. In the late 1990s, duck foie gras from Southwest France was added to the country's array of specialty food products that have a European Union–designated label of “protected geographical indication.”¹⁰ In 2005, the French National Assembly and Senate voted to protect foie gras legally as part of the country's “official gastronomic heritage.” This was done ostensibly in response to concerns from other EU member states about its production ethics. This decision embedded foie gras materially and symbolically within the idea of the nation in a country whose international legacy of culinary excellence is several centuries old and a key point of national pride.

Today, the rural landscapes and small-scale proprietors of French foie gras production are identified as national treasures, and these reverential sentiments have helped transform them into a magnet for tourists. An artisanal foie gras sector is thriving in the Southwestern regions, where local governments and tourism associations promote foie gras as a unique element of cultural patrimony, gastronomy, and *terroir* (the taste of place). Several towns proclaim themselves the “capital” of foie gras, marketing themselves as attractive, authentic, and delicious places to visit. Visitors are introduced to foie gras as a special and artisanal, and not an industrial, product that needs to be protected. The larger industry's production conditions are omitted from these more marketable national myths and masked by sentimentalized narratives of shared history and invocations of collective memory. But how foie gras assumed this status of imperiled tradition—making it mostly (but not fully) unavailable for contestation—was not an inevitable process. Importantly, this occurred because international affairs can and do have consequences for local settings when the political climate is right.

In the United States, commercial foie gras production did not exist until the 1980s, with the establishment of two independent business ventures, one on each coast. Sonoma Foie Gras was founded in Califor-

nia by the aforementioned Guillermo Gonzalez, an El Salvador native who had learned to produce foie gras at a small goose farm in Southwest France. Hudson Valley Foie Gras was established by Michael Ginor, an ex-bond trader turned chef, and Izzy Yanay, an Israeli-born duck breeder, who bought and converted a rundown chicken farm in upstate New York. Before the 1980s, fresh foie gras was nearly impossible to obtain in the United States, namely because of federal government restrictions on importing fresh poultry products from Europe.¹¹ Close proximity to the culinary epicenters of New York and San Francisco aided business for each farm. In the 1990s, foie gras dishes became a hot culinary trend at elite urban restaurants in conjunction with Americans' expanding tastes for gourmet cuisine.¹² Mentions of foie gras in the *New York Times* peaked in the late 1990s.¹³ Hudson Valley's marketing director during that time period told me that it "was on everybody's menus. The restaurant reviewer for the *New York Times* would use the words 'ubiquitous foie gras dish.' So it went from this weird thing to part of the vernacular." As foie gras came into the language of prestigious restaurants, leading chefs, and affluent diners, she said, "We saw our sales go up, and everybody just wanted it. We were mostly worried that people would get bored and move on, as they always do, to some other ingredient. Not about legislation."

By the mid-2000s, Hudson Valley employed two hundred people and was producing about three hundred and fifty thousand ducks a year, distributing its products through gourmet food purveyors across the country. Sonoma Foie Gras, later rebranded as Sonoma Artisan Foie Gras, was producing about seventy-five thousand ducks a year before was it shut down by California's ban on foie gras's production and sale in July 2012. In the late 1990s, ex-Hudson Valley employees started raising foie gras ducks at nearby LaBelle Farms, which produces about one hundred and thirty thousand ducks a year. A fourth operation, Au Bon Canard—a two-person farm outside of Minneapolis that produces around two thousand ducks per year—was founded in the early 2000s. While multiple economic interests are indubitably involved in its operations, the US foie gras market was worth about twenty-three to twenty-five million dollars in the late 2000s—1/100th the size of the French industry.¹⁴

For US consumers, foie gras is a curiosity. Calling it an industry (five hundred thousand ducks out of the ten *billion* animals that traverse the American food system each year) is almost laughable.¹⁵ A typical modern chicken plant in the United States processes more birds in a single day than Sonoma Foie Gras did in an entire year.¹⁶ Foie gras's price point puts it out of most Americans' reach: its retail cost is around seventy dollars a pound, and it is available to consumers primarily at upscale restaurants and gourmet food stores.¹⁷ Most people in the United States don't know what it is; even fewer have ever tried it. Where foie gras *has* made a mark is among an influential group of restaurateurs and chefs, many of whom have entered the realm of celebrity as cultural taste-makers.¹⁸ Foie gras dishes have graced the menus of some of the country's most celebrated restaurants. And foie gras found a fan base among a crop of "omnivorous" and "adventurous" food lovers who seek out unusual, exotic, and exciting eating experiences and take food very seriously¹⁹—people who are often and sometimes pejoratively called "foodies."²⁰

Foie gras, however, is not just a symbol of gourmet cuisine; it is also a matter of moral politics and contention for people who believe abstinence is not enough. In the United States and elsewhere, foie gras production is heavily criticized on ethical grounds. Detractors argue that the practice of force-feeding ducks and geese with a twenty-to-thirty-centimeter-long tube—typically made of metal²¹—to enlarge and fatten their livers is an obvious case of animal cruelty.²² Though activists attempted to raise public awareness of foie gras's existence in the 1990s, beginning with a 1991 "investigation" by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) of Hudson Valley Foie Gras (then called Commonwealth Enterprises), their impact was limited. In 1999, after receiving letters from animal rights organizations and concerned celebrities, the Smithsonian Institution cancelled a panel discussion and tasting organized to promote *Foie Gras: A Passion*, a newly published book by Michael Ginor of Hudson Valley Foie Gras.²³ These and a few other actions received little notice beyond animal rights circles and a few brief newspaper articles.

Then, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the stars aligned for foie gras's opponents. A month after the vandalism to Sonoma Saveurs, San

Francisco ABC television affiliate KGO aired clips on its evening newscast from a short film called *Delicacy of Despair*, produced by a group called GourmetCruelty.com.²⁴ The film (which remains available on the Internet) showed the group's "undercover investigations" and "open rescues"—a common direct action tactic where activists remove animals from farms or animal operations for "rehabilitation" while documenting the conditions in which they were found—of ducks at Sonoma Foie Gras and Hudson Valley Foie Gras.²⁵ Immediately after the broadcast, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who had earlier reported on the Sonoma Saveurs vandalism contacted the head of the Animal Protection and Rescue League (APRL), a law student turned animal-rights activist named Bryan Pease, who had collaborated with the GourmetCruelty.com team in trespassing onto and secretly videotaping operations at foie gras farms for the previous three years. Pease invited him to sneak onto Sonoma Foie Gras's grounds with him and three other APRL activists and a video camera the following night. The *Los Angeles Times* story—which detailed how the group squeezed into the barn through a gap in the wall and took four ducks with them (out of the fifteen hundred there)—ran the next day.²⁶ Guillermo Gonzalez sued Pease in civil court for trespassing and theft; Pease and In Defense of Animals, a legally oriented animal rights group, countersued Gonzalez for breaking anti-cruelty laws.

Then the state of California got involved. In February 2004, John Burton, a Democratic California state senator and then-president pro tempore, introduced a bill in the state legislature—the first of its kind in the country—to "prohibit force feeding a bird for the purpose of enlarging the bird's liver beyond normal size and the sale of products that are a result of this process." Burton proposed this legislation, co-sponsored by a number of animal rights organizations, because he felt, as he explained, that foie gras "is not only unnecessary, it's inhumane."²⁷ That September, the bill passed in a 21–14 vote and was signed into law by then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.²⁸ Importantly, the new law's text included an almost eight-year implementation delay, professedly to give Sonoma Foie Gras time to develop "a humane way for a duck to consume grain to increase the size of its liver through natural processes." This allowed the state to balance the right of somebody to

have a legitimate business with that of the thing to be ostensibly protected, namely the humane treatment of the ducks. In exchange for withdrawing his opposition, Guillermo Gonzalez was granted legal immunity from the anticruelty suits filed against him by APRL and In Defense of Animals (which he told writer Mark Caro had cost him \$400,000), as well as from any other lawsuits filed over the extended period. The law took effect—putting Sonoma Foie Gras out of business—on July 1, 2012.

Thereafter, foie gras became not only a prime and energizing issue for a number of animal rights and animal welfare activists, who were loosely connected through online communities and preexisting networks, but also one that received enormous media attention.²⁹ Events in California provided a clarion call for animal rights activists in different cities across the country to create anti-foie gras campaigns. National media outlets—from the *New York Times* to *Time Magazine* to Fox News to *Wine Spectator*—began to take notice of these self-proclaimed “duck freedom fighters.”³⁰ Food writers and restaurant critics published think pieces about their own divided views. Foie gras was becoming a new hot-button issue in the politics of food.

As a target, foie gras offered animal rights activists something relatively incomparable within the multi-trillion-dollar food industry. Any number of arguments or issues could be made regarding cruelty to animals in the contemporary industrial food system, yet few of them become *causes célèbres*.³¹ Foie gras production appeared shockingly inhumane and, along with having a foreign-sounding name, lacked cultural or affective connections for “regular folks.” It also lacked institutional resources. None of the four farms in the United States has had strong ties to national poultry or meat industry lobbies. This meant that activists could ostensibly own the issue. They anticipated that they could harness enough public indignation to make foie gras disappear completely. They could be the moralistic voices that would convince restaurants to stop serving it, people to stop eating it, and politicians to outlaw it. And while legal bans on foie gras would be mostly symbolic victories—in that they would not actually affect most American eaters—ostensibly they could be footholds into these groups’ larger battles against animal agriculture. The opportunity was golden, and the stakes were high.

CLAIMS TO MORAL AUTHORITY

The realities of the last decade's disputes show that the cases for *and* against foie gras are much more about moral imperatives than objective ones. Most people and groups involved in the fights—both opponents and supporters—profess to care deeply about the contemporary food system. Yet how all of these people categorize foie gras on a spectrum of serious social problems, food-based and otherwise, is particularly relative. The stories recounted in this book are about the actions of social actors who all truly believe that they are doing the right thing—even working to promote a more just and better world. Yet, these people and groups have fundamentally different priorities, motives, and base moral convictions. Additionally, each argument for or against the production and consumption of foie gras is conceptually incomplete unless one also appreciates its political and economic contexts; more specifically, we cannot disentangle the moral politics of food from the practical politics of state regulation and the logistics of market forces.

The people fighting against foie gras are activists in a global social movement—that of animal rights. Animal activists of many stripes argue that they are following in the footsteps of earlier moral reformers who challenged society's dominant cultural codes and focused on the societal injuriousness of racism and sexism. Animals, too, deserve respect, compassion, and rights.³² The animal rights movement is largely nonviolent, yet, like most large and diverse social movements, it has factions that believe in different courses of action that use force, law-breaking, coercion, or intimidation to fight what they believe to be moral injustice to animals. When selecting a particular target, social movement activists often have many goals in mind, including heightening people's awareness, fundraising, increasing and shaping media coverage, and fomenting behavioral and legal changes. For those eager to combat animal cruelty, the very notion of force-feeding ducks with a metal tube seems to demand public outrage. In the United States, this is only exacerbated by the fact that the process results in an unpronounceable and expensive luxury food. The activists' other main allegation is that the fattened liver's metabolic changes are not the result of a normal physiological process, as producers claim, but instead a painful one of

induced pathological disease.³³ As one activist told me, alluding to societal consensus on what Americans care about, there is too high an ethical price for an “entire industry that just revolves around cruelty” to continue to exist.

Symbols, words, and vivid images have played crucial roles in conjuring collective disgust over foie gras in the US court of public opinion. In my interviews with animal rights activists, as well as in their media interviews and press releases, on their websites and at their protests, they repeatedly used the terms “jamming,” “shoving,” and “forcing” to describe a process they consider to be “traumatic,” “abhorrent,” “torture,” and “inherently cruel” and causing the birds “unmitigated pain and suffering.”³⁴ Veterinarian and anti-foie gras activist Holly Cheever described the force-feeding process in testimony before the Chicago City Council as

[a] rough inflexible metal tube . . . jammed down their esophagus three times a day while they are being forcibly restrained. . . . Once they can no longer walk, because they are so crippled by their swollen abdomens, they are seen pathetically dragging themselves on their wings to try to escape the humans who are feeding them.³⁵

Hard-hitting and grisly as such accusations can be, they have proved more persuasive to some than to others. A number of restaurants and prominent chefs have sworn off foie gras. Elected officials in some states that did not have foie gras production introduced bills to prevent farms from setting up shop. A number of local anti-foie gras campaigns in cities around the country received national press coverage—a social movement achievement.

Yet activists have also encountered resistance to their depictions of foie gras as the epitome of evil. Attitudes toward food tastes—and the overall ethics of eating animals—are, of course, diverse. Many diners and chefs consider foie gras a legitimate culinary choice that should remain just that, a choice. Moreover, a number of journalists, academics, and opinion leaders who have visited foie gras farms themselves have raised questions about the veracity of animal rights activists’ claims of cruelty and their depictions of the production process.

Foie gras's champions maintain that while the force-feeding process might look harmful to an untrained human eye, it does not necessarily cause the birds to suffer. Most Americans, even many agricultural scientists, know little about waterfowl biology.³⁶ The problem that foie gras's proponents face is that people are anthropomorphizing the birds—attributing to them human attributes and qualities. Of course ducks *can* feel pain and stress, foie gras producers concur, but what would hurt humans and ducks is not the same. As industry members repeatedly told me, waterfowl and human digestive tracts are physiologically different. Waterfowl esophagi are keratinous and do not have nerve endings; they swallow rocks for their gizzards to grind food as part of their digestion. Additionally, the birds have separate passages for ingesting food and air, unlike humans, and do not have gag reflexes, as we do. At one farm in France with an on-site slaughterhouse, I asked to see and touch the esophagi of geese that had just been butchered. The insides felt smooth and rubbery, and they bent like fingernails after a hot shower. Additionally, producers and concurring scientists assert that the fattening process takes advantage of a natural physiological feature of migratory birds, which gorge and store excess fat in their livers for energy for migrating. They claim that the process is reversible if it is ceased (unlike liver disease in humans, which is not). You could not do the same to chickens, because their livers would not transform as migratory waterfowl livers would.

In France, I found that producers responded to charges of torture and cruelty by dismissing, or even gently mocking, the idea that they and their work were causing pain. Many claimed to “adore” their birds; yet, as one told me, “It is their job, their destiny, to give us livers. They are farm animals, not pets.” They pointed to waterfowl’s biological uniqueness as well as to the relatively small-scale and intimate, hands-on nature of foie gras production. They declared unapologetically that great care is taken with the birds on “good” farms—that “a duck that is treated poorly will not produce a good foie gras.” “There is an enormous complicity between the goose and the feeder, a respect, an affective link,” says Ariane Daguin of D’Artagnan, a French-born gourmet food purveyor in the New York City area (and daughter of an esteemed

chef) who was among the first to introduce fresh foie gras to Manhattan restaurants.

Similarly, in trying to occlude controversy, foie gras's US defenders in the culinary realm suggest that its production is no morally worse than our modern system of giant factory farms, and because of its relatively small-scale and precise production methods could even be considered more humane. Every time we choose to eat meat, we balance our desire to do so with an animal's discomfort and/or death. From this perspective, if a person or society believes it morally acceptable to raise and kill animals for their meat, they should have no objection to foie gras that comes from "good" farms. (Of course, not all foie gras farms are well-run.) The larger issue, these defenders assert, is people's general disconnectedness from the unromantic realities of farming. Although surveys show that rising numbers of people are concerned about the well-being of farm animals in intensive modern agriculture,³⁷ for many, seeing any type of animal operation that does not resemble a child's storybook is jarring. Significantly, an influential segment of people involved in contemporary food politics in both countries—chefs, critics, food writers, sustainable-agriculture proponents, and others—declare that the fight against foie gras is a red herring, that it diverts attention away from "real" and "more serious" social problems found in, and caused by, the modern industrial food system.

It is important to reiterate that the "problem" of foie gras cannot be easily resolved by an appeal to scientific study, in this case to objective research on waterfowl physiology, independent of biases. Both sides of the debate claim empirical certainty and each has recruited sympathetic scientific experts to lend authority to their assertions. Moreover, both camps have accused the other of cherry-picking and purposefully ignoring key evidence, and members of both immediately express doubt about the objectivity of the findings of any research study, no matter who conducted it, that contradicts their expectations and perceptions. To the extent that I present information about the biological science of foie gras in the chapters that follow, it is to establish what is and is not known about waterfowl physiology and, more importantly, about how different groups have mobilized scientific discourses to suit their pur-

poses; it is not about resolving the discrepancies in the science deployed by both sides.

Foie gras has struck a resonant chord for many—it has often (and polemically) been called America's most controversial food. Its politics reveal how ideas and concerns about morality intersect with markets, social movements, and state systems of law and regulation. The very topic of foie gras's existence, as well as its presence on menus, has galvanized some people—animal rights activists, chefs, industry members, consumers, and legislators—to action in ways that other issues have not. These politics involve deep, identity-laden concerns, and they illuminate the various ways in which institutions and organizations, as makers and mediators of morally grounded cultural meanings, are critical to contested tastes.

CONTESTED TASTES AND GASTROPOLITICS

Why do Americans consider grilled shrimp delicious and boiled insects repulsive? One answer is that we eat as much with our imaginations as we do with our mouths. Foods can denote very different things from table to table and across time and place. Subjective choice plays a role in what and how we eat, but these choices are conditioned by the social worlds in which we live. What we eat can reveal our national identities, our ethnicities, our social class, our subcultural loyalties, and even our political commitments. Cuisine offers both symbolic and substantive norms of group membership and belonging. Culinary practices and tastes can bring people together or push them apart, for example, through revulsion at others' food preferences.³⁸ Americans might call eating worms, grasshoppers, or eyeballs disgusting (even though entire television shows are now devoted to such culinary thrill-seeking), while members of other societies find casseroles or peanut butter—a quintessential American childhood snack—similarly unpalatable.

While we might chalk up examples like these to legitimate or idiosyncratic differences in culturally learned tastes, the phenomenon of disgust over food preferences also works as an instrument to construct social and political order. Disgust exposes the basic distinction between strange and familiar tastes, and it permits negative associations to be

made between foods and their eaters.³⁹ In other words, we project moral judgments onto what, and who, we consider unworthy of respect or empathy—how could “those people” eat that? For instance, to rail against the supposed harms that McDonald’s has wrought on the world is, today, a way for members of the professional middle class to show they are right-minded and virtuous consumers.⁴⁰ This phenomenon is nothing new. The history of American immigration and ethnic assimilation is replete with xenophobic denials of others’ humanity, not to mention citizenship rights, signaled in part by disgust at food and taste preferences. Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth century, for example, were frequently stereotyped as unwilling to assimilate, infuriating social reformers across East Coast cities with their heavy culinary use of imported tomatoes and garlic (called “Italian perfume”) and their refusal to espouse more mainstream American diets.⁴¹ Similarly, over the last century, social alarms over other people’s food choices have typically concerned the food—and thus moral standing—of the poor, as food studies scholars such as Charlotte Biltekoff and Melanie DuPuis have repeatedly shown.⁴² Food preferences have also worked internationally to separate “us” and “them”—calling French people “frogs” or Asians “dog eaters,” for example.

However, while we know from both personal experience and substantive research that people’s tastes and opinions tend to be fairly stable over time, we also know that societal-level changes in tastes do happen. We, as both individuals and groups, do respond to the shifting norms and values of our communities. Foods are tools in these processes, materially, discursively, and symbolically. Something desirable can become disgusting, and vice versa. As *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik writes, “The good food of 25 years ago always looks unappetizing, and the good food of a hundred years ago always looks inedible.”⁴³ Yet some foods and culinary practices become not only classified as old-fashioned or unappetizing, but also castigated as social problems that demand attention. As such, in a civil society such as ours, where do we draw the line against foods we consider wrong or immoral enough to fight over, to threaten other people over, or to seek legal means to prohibit others from producing or consuming? What influences and animates these processes?

These questions orbit around what I call gastropolitics—conflicts,

both small and large, over food and culinary practices that are branded as social problems and that concurrently enmesh the domains of social movements, markets, and states. I see gastropolitics, a term originally coined several decades ago by social theorist Arjun Appadurai to describe food's semiotic and classificatory power within everyday social relations,⁴⁴ as a way to conceptualize food's cultural power in politicizing taste. Eating or eschewing certain foods can become overt ways of signifying moral anxieties about other people's actions and political concerns about the social order. For a food like foie gras to be simultaneously labeled a social problem and tendered as a symbol of national heritage lays bare the competing interests of movements, markets, and states at the heart of gastropolitics.

Importantly, my approach to gastropolitics purposefully refers to the term "gastronomy," rather than simply "food." Gastronomy has a double meaning, referring to the study and practice of culinary excellence as well as to culinary styles and protocols that are considered specific to places, cultural backgrounds, historical periods, or groups of people—what food studies scholars call "foodways."⁴⁵ In her foundational work on nineteenth-century French cuisine, sociologist Priscilla Ferguson calls gastronomy a cultural field, or a social arena composed of all those interested in food that is special or distinctive in some way, including producers, consumers, and food literati.⁴⁶ In this regard, gastronomic tastes serve as identity-locating social currencies.

Gastropolitics, as elucidated in this book, is a close sociological cousin to the large and excellent body of interdisciplinary academic research and popular writing on food politics published in the last two decades. A great deal of this other work has focused on the politics of nutrition advice, the power of food corporations, the consequences of agricultural policies for the natural environment and human health, the treatment of workers in the food system, and the creation of locally embedded food growing and provisioning systems that are alternatives to industrial agribusiness. Gastropolitics, however, also draws from sociological theories of culture and of "symbolic politics" to highlight how, why, and for whom certain foods become touchstones of moral and cultural, as well as political, contention.⁴⁷ Gastropolitics foregrounds why and how people try to claim authority and to convince others what is right or wrong to eat.

And because gastropolitics are about struggle over cultural meanings and group identities, they differ from these other types of food politics.

I use the term “politics” in a broad sense here, to mean the efforts of social actors, including and beyond politicians, to achieve particular and divergent goals. Conflict among these actors and over these goals (which can be contradictory) is implicit in politics. How people make, market, regulate, acquire, consider, and consume food involves struggles over food’s substantive, material qualities as well as its symbolic dimensions. Anthropologist Mary Douglas was one of the first to make this connection by referring to eating as a “field of action. It is a medium in which other levels of categorization becomes manifest.”⁴⁸ In other words, food nourishes our minds as well as our bodies as potent symbols of place, purpose, and identity. Gastropolitics, then, are everyday politics where people and groups actively engage to keep or change what is eaten, and they are also formal politics related to laws and governmental regulations that shape the food system. They lay bare *why* people are willing to fight over food and *how* they marshal cultural and material resources to do so. As such, gastropolitical battles are situated in time and place, a point that applies to the historically specific practicalities of markets. Indeed, in the last few decades, people worldwide have become increasingly cognizant of the political, as well as cultural, implications of their food choices and practices.

For these reasons, my analysis of foie gras’s gastropolitics is also grounded in the sociology of culture, which obliges careful examination of language, framing, meanings, and the affective sentiments that food and culinary practices generate. Cultural sociologists have studied meaning-making in a variety of modes of cultural production, including media, art, rituals, stories, and beliefs. But the symbolic and substantive content of food has hardly been considered in this vein. This omission is surprising given how fundamental food and eating are to social life. Considering food through the lens of cultural sociology—especially how some foods become the foci of public sentiment—similarly sharpens our theories of how cultural categories are substantiated, and how cultural power is deployed, harnessed, suppressed, and contested.⁴⁹

My analysis draws on the work of those who have studied contestation in other cultural markets and fields, such as markets for art, litera-

ture, or music. In each of these fields, battles over symbols, discourses, and cultural prescripts can have real effects on livelihoods and on markets. Symbolic politics work to reshape these fields, and to redefine culture, by moralizing their consumption. As sociologist Joseph Gusfield wrote regarding symbolic politics, “issues which seem foolish . . . are often important for what they symbolize about the style or culture which is being recognized or derogated.”⁵⁰ This is especially true when consumers (and their wallets) are solicited as powerful actors by an issue’s defenders or detractors.⁵¹

However, food differs from these other cultural goods in several important ways. First, food has a special place in our lives; linked to our bodies and our health, the act of physical ingestion creates visceral responses—and anxieties—that most other cultural goods do not, despite how strongly some people might feel about country music or science fiction. Second, food is mundane—part of our routine, everyday lives—and is only one of a variety of concerns competing for people’s attention. This everyday nature of food exposes a duality: we can be lulled into seeing it as unexceptional or innocuous, or we can ask whether its ordinariness belies important cultural and affective attachments.⁵²

Most importantly, the food industry is a market of a vastly different scale than industries in these other cultural fields, with a greater number of people and organizations that are directly affected by changes in its political economy. Government policies, powerful transnational companies, and global financial economics all shape the production of food. Food is big business. In the United States, food and agriculture are the second largest industry (after defense). With the industrialization of agriculture and food production in the twentieth century came conglomeration, corporate appropriation, and increased political power.⁵³ Similarly, in Europe, an integrated market for agriculture and food products has been a core activity since the European Union’s formation and currently absorbs about fifty percent of the EU’s annual budget. Even though foie gras is but a minute fraction of the food industry, challenges or changes to policy can have implications for other industry segments.

Foie gras is an exemplary case of gastropolitics and contested tastes in the twenty-first century. Its significance as a social symbol has arisen not only from the varied meanings and values it indexes, but also from

the affective sentiments it drives. Contestation around foie gras exposes acute political tensions around consumption, identity, and cultural authority in today's culinary world. These battles illustrate how the juxtaposition of moralistic concerns and the culture of markets makes our ongoing relationship with food—and with each other—invariably political. Some call foie gras historically and culturally irreplaceable for who they are, personally or professionally. Others find its very existence upsetting, offensive, and a reason for protest.

Gastropolitics as Moral Politics

There are two connotations to the term “moral” that bear on how people actually engage with gastropolitics as moral politics. “Moral” can denote universal considerations of right and wrong, and it can be taken to mean relativist or situational questions of appropriate actions or behaviors that vary among individuals or groups. Drawing on research traditions in the sociology of culture that theorize processes of making meaning around contested tastes, I construe these different ways of talking about what is moral as *ethics* and *boundaries*.

A key way the term is used, especially outside of academic circles, is as a synonym for “ethical.” Ethical convictions inspire people to act in certain ways due to concern with judgments about right and wrong, just and unjust, good and evil. They establish ideas for what people *should* believe and do—and in the case of gastropolitics, what is or is not ethically good to eat or to condemn. In this view, moral persons and practices are just and fair and humane, and they avoid harm to others. Their opposite is “immoral” or “amoral”—corrupt, depraved, or wicked. The power of cultural choices or symbols, in this view, resides in their ability to signify virtuous or ethically principled tenets.

With regard to boundaries, morality refers to feelings of self-worth, often in relation to one's identity-laden social connections and solidarity with one or more groups. It is about group membership or belonging, and it is about the acceptability or appropriateness of certain ways of being. Culture, in this view, is a reminder of affective bonds. From a complementary perspective, culture is a body of representations and texts that provide symbolic referents for the things that people com-

monly do together, as groups or societies, in domains ranging from the arts to education to table manners. It is a way that social life is ordered, patterned, and organized into actions and events that become easily recognizable and understandable.⁵⁴ Moral tastes and apologetics are, in effect, mechanisms that make groups and break them.

Many experiences in our lives offer sources of moral meaning that help create and reaffirm the “symbolic boundary” lines demarcating our social identities. The concept of symbolic boundaries, popularized by sociologist Michèle Lamont, denotes the intangible lines people use to make categorical distinctions about the moral worthiness of persons, objects, and practices.⁵⁵ These boundaries are about sameness and about difference, and they can be drawn along ethnic, racial, gender, social class, regional, and other lines. Yet, as Lamont explains, people do not draw or stretch symbolic boundaries based solely on their personal experiences or beliefs about merit and value. Rather, they borrow heavily from others who have similar lifestyles and from the places, time periods, and societies in which they live.⁵⁶

These boundaries shape collective understandings of “good” and “bad” taste, especially as these understandings articulate with consumer identities in the public sphere. Importantly, it is not necessarily what people have in common, but also what they *reject*, that serve as markers of taste boundaries and serve as bases for exclusion based on group identity. For example, a declaration such as “we eat pork; they don’t” articulates tropes of religious or ethnic similarity and otherness through shared consumption patterns and prohibitions. Class-based versions of food-related taste judgments link to how rich and middle-class people assess poor people’s food choices (often as societal problems and with great disdain).⁵⁷ Symbolic boundaries and politics that blend group identities with gustatory tastes can indubitably be more elastic or expansive in some places and for some situations than in others.⁵⁸ Yet, while culinary tastes around the globe have changed dramatically in the last few decades, disputes over whose taste is the right one (either as ethics or as boundaries) can still be extremely contentious.

In some notable ways, what I discern here as ethics and boundaries are complementary parts of a single phenomenon. Both orient the ways that people use culture to make social connections and to coordinate

goals with others.⁵⁹ Primarily, they fuse when people take on a set of beliefs or practices not only as reflective of their personal or social identities, but also as a motivating source of honor, shame, or ostensibly righteous behavior. For example, avoiding shellfish for religious reasons, claiming a vegan identity, or feeding one's children only organic food all denote a combination of ethics and boundaries. And when the ethical status of a food or food-related practice becomes the focus of scathing public critiques and debate, the permeability of boundaries is indubitably moralized.

In all of this, consumption operates as a structuring force. Sometimes the choice to consume or abstain marks one's efforts or propensity for group belonging. Sometimes it constitutes a refusal to blend in with the crowd, or even an explicit act of ideological resistance. We can think easily of other consumer items that have proved morally controversial in both the recent and more distant past: alcohol, headscarves, cigarettes, cars, guns, diamonds, bottled water, and even plastic bags. Similarly, economic and cultural sociologists following in the footsteps of Viviana Zelizer have investigated markets for morally questionable goods and services that elicit questions of consumer and business ethics.⁶⁰ Examples include child labor, the creation of life insurance, sex work, and the medical market for human blood and body parts.⁶¹

This evocative body of research has shown that the success of attempts to legitimate such markets depends heavily on the interests, identities, and ideologies of the people and groups doing the legitimating.⁶² This research helps us see how groups and organizations coordinate marketplace interactions and mobilize others who share their values, how economic interests are reassessed to meet new social and cultural demands, and how social and moral judgments become politically concrete. Additionally, conflicts over the legal statuses of the markets for these contentious products invoke the roles of social movements and government as influential moral actors. This is the framework that this book, too, highlights.

But food is different from cigarettes or life insurance, because we cannot imagine a world without food production. So moral arguments are not about food *per se*, but what kinds of foods are appropriate—we, of course, do not need to eat everything that could be eaten. Boundaries

come into play in terms of cultural groups and the political uses of symbols, while ethics come into play in terms of protecting access to needs as well as preventing harm. Some foods become the bases by which activists see themselves as agents of change and others see themselves as upholders of the status quo.⁶³ Recent US history shows that frames of public health and consumer safety have been most successful in removing other controversial items from people's diets, such as trans fats from cooking oils and packaged foods and soda from school vending machines. On an international scale, ongoing disputes over seal hunting pit indigenous groups in Arctic regions against international animal rights groups and trade organizations. Shark fin soup, a *de rigueur* dish at Chinese special events, has seen legal bans in the United States and Canada and even criticism in China due to the practice of finning, in which sharks are caught, their fins sliced off, and the fish thrown back into the ocean, where they typically bleed to death.

These are but a few examples of recent gastropolitical conflicts. Our food choices—what we eat as individuals, as well as members of groups, of communities, and of society—are complex and multidimensional. And we also care about what other people eat. Judgments, actual and implied, about the “right” food choices affect when, where, and for whom different lines delineating moral identities are drawn. A gastropolitical perspective offers an analytical lens for seeing why and how our food choices matter for moral ties between people and markets, as well as between markets and states.

Markets, Movements, States

If symbolic and moral politics help orient us to the ways in which gastropolitics are about values and identities, we must also pay close attention to the institutional structures in which they are embedded. I argue that to fully grasp the concerns and consequences of gastropolitics, we can, and must, look at how foods and foodways sit at the intersection of markets, the state, and social movements.

At their core, markets are structures of exchange where producers and consumers meet. When we talk about sanctioning producers or consumers, we are talking about reshaping markets. The structure of the

state provides a general rubric for understanding the authority and jurisdiction of elected and appointed officials to translate values, needs, and opinions into policy, from local laws to international treaties. For political sociologists, the state possesses symbolic power, or the cultural authority to set the rules of the game and ensure they are experienced as legitimate—although the extent to which state power intrudes into markets is a point of particular ideological contention.⁶⁴ Social movements are situated in the domain of civil society and provide a way to consider actors who are not directly involved in the actions of either the state or the market, but who work to influence one or both. Sociologist Sidney Tarrow offers a usefully broad definition of movements as “collective challenges based on common purposes, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities.”⁶⁵ The triangulation of these domains merits attention, especially for how social movements are essential to understanding consumer identities and changing tastes generally, and specifically in the realm of food.

The social organization of the food industry is highly pertinent here. Markets are economic spaces that limit and stratify foods’ costs, availability, and cultural reception, and it is the state (in theory, at least) that codifies and enforces rules for food production, distribution, marketing, and sale. Of course, few if any of us are fully cognizant of the innumerable details and political interests that matter in getting different kinds of food to our plates. When we go out for pizza, for example, we don’t typically think about all of the arcane regulatory codes that pertain to the wheat in the crust, the tomatoes in the sauce, the milk in the cheese, the meat and preservatives in the pepperoni, the water used to clean the pans, or the workers who produced those ingredients or wiped down the tables. Social movements are key here to understanding how people who are not directly involved in the state or in industry can influence either sector. Mobilization around social problems related to food and eating does not just happen; it takes planning, resources, and coordinated effort. And many of the groups that compel such actions today are established, large-scale organizations whose influences are, and should be, taken seriously. Today, for example, groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (2014 revenue of \$51 million) and The Humane Society of the United States (2014 revenue of \$186

million)⁶⁶ retain teams of staff lawyers, hold enough stock in several food companies to introduce shareholder resolutions, and file lawsuits directly against individual food producers for violating state and federal laws.⁶⁷

This brings us back to foie gras, the axis around which many adversarial ideas and interests—and this book—revolve. We might expect items that provoke such hostility to be culturally or economically important for many people, similar to the ways prohibition of alcohol or regulations on tobacco have spurred vigorous public debates and legal actions in the recent past. Yet foie gras—a food consumed by few Americans—has proved incendiary, disruptive, and a touchstone of activism over food ethics in the United States in a way that seems disproportionate to the scale of its market. This contrasts with France, where most people not only find foie gras production unproblematic, but underscore its centrality in their cultural and national identity. Even though foie gras is far from the most pervasive problem in the contemporary food system, the issues that surround it raise broad and thorny questions about the morals and ethics of eating. Of how we treat animals. Of tradition and troublesome heritage. Of the practices of the modern food industry. Of defining the common good. Of what others are permitted, or not permitted, to eat. These are issues that people hold close to their hearts, setting the table for conflict.

Today, foie gras is emblematically a French food. Chapter 2 tells how this became so, and discusses the consequences of this development. I argue that foie gras overflowed its original regional borders and came to denote French national culture at least in part *because* it is contentious elsewhere—a significant version of gastropolitics that I call gastrationalism. Yet how foie gras is marketed to the French public today, including by the French state, conveniently obscures the industry's capital-intensive expansion and transformations over the last few decades. In chapter 3, I argue that foie gras's status as a shared but imperiled treasure in the French collective imagination comes to the fore in this regard. In picturesque towns and regions that claim it as authentic tradition, local people and associations actively craft foie gras's moral worth in the face of intense international criticism. These sites create a physical and affective backdrop for provocative questions of how we “see” the production

of both food and culture, as well as for making sociological connections among food, memory, and symbolic politics.

In chapters 4 and 5, I argue that in the United States foie gras has come to serve as a cultural barometer for complex issues of culinary moralism and gastropolitics. Chapter 4 analyzes what happened when Chicago decided to institute and then rescind a ban on the sale of foie gras in the city's restaurants. Reactions to the short-lived foie gras ban, especially humorous ones, underscored the profound connections between politics and eating. Chapter 5 shifts attention to the more general challenges and paradoxes of developing moral understandings around a contested food such as foie gras by asking, up front and center, "How do we know if a practice is cruel? For individuals who wish to be moral eaters, who is to be believed?" This chapter offers analyses of the moral discourses, empirical claims, perceptions, and political strategies that both sides of the foie gras debate have employed. The conclusion considers implications of this analysis for thinking about identities, cultural change, and how symbols energize people in new ways in today's world. It also predicts foie gras politics' ongoing relevance, not because people cannot live without foie gras cheesecake but because of the nerves it has hit for everyone with a stake in the worlds of food and consumer culture.

Foie gras's gastropolitics in both the United States and France show how tightly the material and social processes of food production and consumption are entwined. While an empirical understanding of the events surrounding it in both countries is relevant to disentangling these threads, I suggest that they also provide a rich context that exposes how people evaluate objects, ideas, and each other through a critical and sometimes disparaging moral lens. Contestation is an important cultural filter, especially for consumer tastes. In both France and the United States, foie gras has zealous defenders and opponents. The prospect that its production in the latter nation will cease one day soon appears likely. But to what end? What are these battles really about? And what can we learn from fights about liver?

This book is about how people have worked to construct a moral climate around the existence of a celebrated and troublesome culinary practice. It is about symbolic politics in action. Perhaps more funda-

mentally, it shows how small decisions can have dramatic and far-reaching effects. From a Chicago restaurant to the European Union, the gastropolitics of foie gras underpin boundaries of nation, culture, ethics, social class, and taste, even as it shapes them. When we fight about a food's existence, we necessarily find ourselves wrapped up in the fantastic ability of food to connect the personal and the political. The politics of foie gras permit us to understand how food can inspire and repel us—as individuals, as organizations, as communities, and as nations. I do realize that this book adds to the attention that foie gras has received in recent years. But I hope that it also proves valuable for readers interested in meaning-making and the politics of consumption, and in how moral politics are embedded in and reconfigured through markets, social movements, and law.