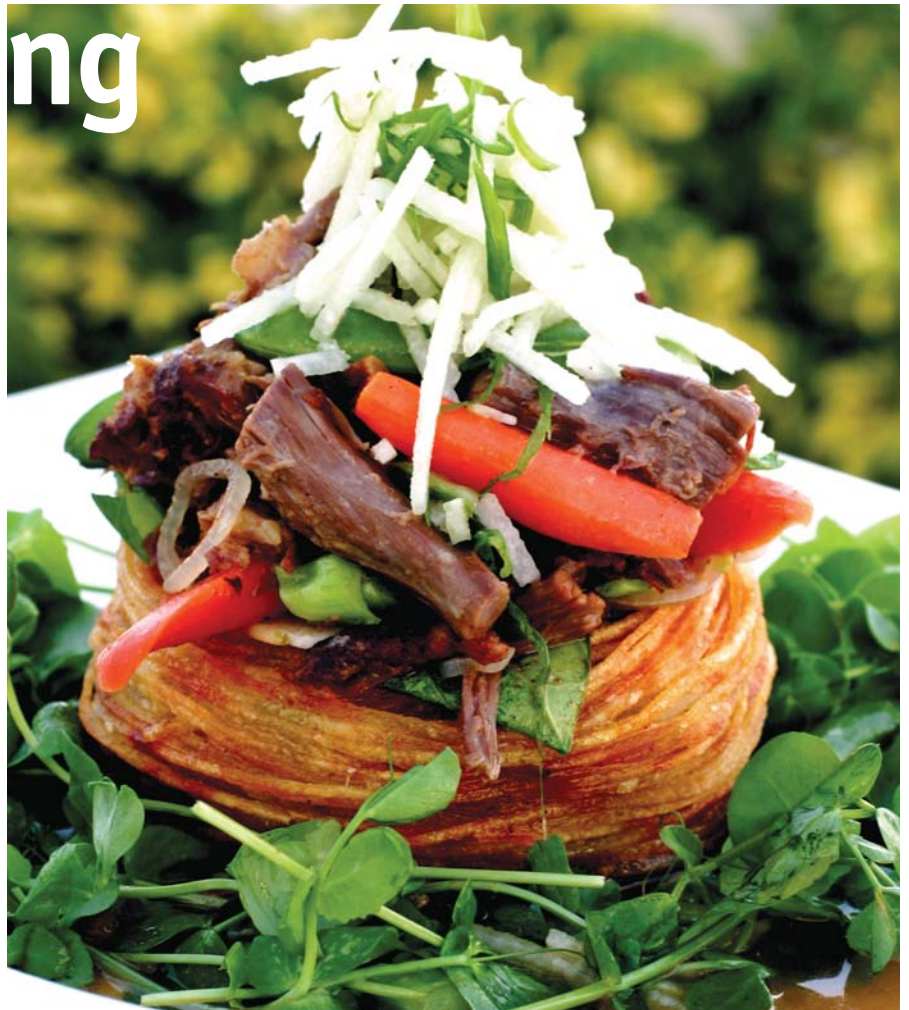


Something Offal

Some chefs love bringing out the flavor of variety meats, but how much of a challenge is it to get diners to try them?

BY KATIE AYOUB

Michael Bloise of South Beach's Wish pulls the braised oxtail off the bone and presents it in this fanciful Idaho potato nest.



Chefs who love offal sing its praises with a gospel-like fervor. They exalt its wonderful flavors and textures. They see the labor of extracting the virtues of these meats as a righteous challenge. And some even believe that menuing offal pays tribute to the glory of the whole beast—from nose to tail and everything in between. But do these chefs have many followers?

First, a definition. Offal, derived from the expression, “fall off the carcass,” is also known as variety meats. According to *Food Lover's Companion* (Barron's Educational Series, 2001), the category includes brains, cheeks, intestines (chitterlings or chitlins), feet and ankles, heart, kidneys, lungs (lights), liver, marrowbone, spleen, stomach (tripe), tail, testicles (fries),

thymus and pancreas (sweetbreads) and tongue.

Certainly, diners in the United States have embraced some variety meats. Chitlins in the South, scrapple in Pennsylvania. Foie gras at the fancy joint in Anywhere, U.S.A. But overall, consumption of meat has become pretty standardized. Skeletal muscle cuts—filets, strip steaks—are the norm. For some reason, diners are okay with pork butt, but how do sweetbreads play? And what about tongue, or beef heart, or cheeks?

Baby steps

We've noticed two favorites (excluding foie gras from the running) in the offal offerings. Sweetbreads and cheeks seem to be gaining favor with the American palate.

At Nick & Toni's in East Hampton, N.Y., the waitstaff plays a crucial role in selling corporate executive chef Joe Realmuto's crispy veal sweetbreads with Quail Hill Farms mustard greens and lemon aioli.

“Once the waiters taste it, they believe in it, then sell it,” says Realmuto. He also sells the sweetbreads through detailed menu description and a familiar approach in cooking them.

The veal sweetbreads are skinned, then soaked in milk to purge the blood. They're then dusted in a mixture of chickpea flour and ground mustard seeds and pan-fried quickly in canola oil. The accompanying mustard greens are dressed with olive oil and lemon juice. A dipping sauce of lemon

aïoli finishes this appetizer.

Another device used to get diners to try offal is to serve it as a complement to a dish. At Le Titi de Paris in Arlington Heights, Ill., chef/owner Michael Maddox serves a semi-boneless quail with sweetbreads, spinach and a wild-mushroom mousse.

“Quail is the safe item in this dish,” says Maddox. “When they ask what sweetbreads taste like, I joke, ‘Like a cross between aardvark and elephant.’ It’s similar to brains, but I can’t tell them that. I tell them that sweetbreads are mild and delicate with a smooth texture.”

For the dish, the quail is split open. The legs and wings are removed, but the drumettes stay intact. The quail is seasoned and splashed with brandy. The spinach is laid out, then the mushroom mousse is spread on the spinach. The sweetbreads, which have simply been poached in a court-bouillon, are placed atop, followed by a roasted portobello cap. The quail is then rolled back together, wrapped in a *crêpinette*, seared and roasted.

At Willow in Arlington, Va., chef/owner Tracy O’Grady serves a one-two punch of variety meats with her braised pork-cheek ravioli with a garnish of crispy sweetbreads.

For the ravioli, she cleans the cheeks, getting rid of the unwanted sinew, and dredges them in flour, salt and pepper. She then sears them. She makes a mirepoix, sautés it with tomato paste and deglazes with pork stock, red wine and aromatics. She braises the cheeks for two to three hours until tender. Once cooled, she dices them. Meanwhile, she skims and reduces the braising liquid, then adds it back onto the cheeks. She seasons them, adds fresh thyme and stuffs them into ravioli. Once cooked, the ravioli are tossed in a simple butter sauce and placed in a mushroom/white truffle broth.

The sweetbreads act as a garnish. They’re soaked in water and briefly



HEATH ROBBINS

At Boston’s The Metropolitan Club, Jeff Fournier uses a three-sectioned rectangle plate to display his braised dekkel, bone marrow and golden crostini.

simmered in a mixture of chicken stock, thyme, celery, carrot, onion and salt. The pot is covered with parchment, and the sweetbreads are poached in the oven for 45 minutes. Once cooked, O’Grady pulls them out of the poaching liquid, places them in a container and flattens them to a 1-inch thickness. After they’re cooled, she dredges them in flour and sears them in clarified butter until crispy.

Tails and marrow and dekkel, oh my

At Wish in South Beach, Fla., executive chef Michael Bloise presented braised oxtail in a potato nest to his diners. After three weeks of discouraging sales, just when he was about to pull the dish, it started to garner a fan base.

“I was really getting frustrated, because it’s a great dish, but so many people turned their noses up at it because they just didn’t understand it,” says Bloise. “I reinforced the dish with my waitstaff, giving them more selling points and explaining to them why I liked it. It started to sell really well.”

One of those selling points is that these “lesser” cuts of meat are usually muscles that work hard for the animal. They get more blood circulated through, which gives them more flavor. “They may be tougher, but it’s our job as chefs to tenderize them and showcase their incredible flavor,” Bloise says.

He rubs the oxtails with cinnamon, paprika and fenugreek, and



HAROLD MCGEE

Chris Cosentino of San Francisco's *Incanto* slices a beef heart then marinates and grills the slices. The heart slices are served with roasted golden beets in a horseradish vinaigrette.

lets them sit for a day to absorb the flavors. He sears the oxtails in peanut oil, and braises them for three hours in red wine, veal stock, cilantro, pineapple rind, oranges and limes. He pulls the meat off the bones, discarding sinew and cartilage. The meat is sautéed with sugar snap peas, baby carrots that have been cooked in lime juice, Thai chile and a bit of the braising liquid. The meat/vegetable mixture is placed in a nest of deep-fried Idaho potatoes.

“By taking the meat off the bones, we’re presenting a more refined version for our upscale clientele,” says Bloise.

Another refined treatment of variety meats comes from The Metropolitan Club in Boston. There, executive chef Jeff Fournier serves bone marrow on the dekkel with a golden crostini. The presentation uses a three-sectioned rectangle plate. On the left is the dekkel, in the center the bone marrow, and on the right is the golden crostini.

“The dekkel is that little fatty thing—the triangle of meat between the loin and the bone on a prime rib. It’s usually thrown away, but it’s

Chefs Weigh In on Why Offal Is a Hard Sell

• **Chris Cosentino, chef at *Incanto* in San Francisco**—“You have a country that sees itself as wealthy. They see variety meats as poor cuts—pigs feet in a jar and chitlins. Shows like ‘Fear Factor’ and ‘Survivor’ don’t help. Young people watch those contestants eat offal that is raw or improperly cooked. It’s seen as gross.”

• **Michael Maddox, chef/owner of *Le Titi de Paris* in Arlington Heights, Ill.**—“It’s harder to sell because our society has become accustomed to eating the better part of meats, like the filet. In the Depression, people ate variety meats because they had to.

But I think it’s slowly coming around—so much depends on the preparation.”

• **Jeff Fournier, executive chef at *The Metropolitan Club* in Boston**—“My impression is that Americans are much more removed from their food than Europeans or Latin Americans, or even most of the world. We’re in an affluent community in Boston. They want the best cuts and don’t want to deal with the other stuff. With foodies, there is a prestige value to offal, but foodies aren’t the majority of restaurant-goers.”

• **Joe Realmuto, corporate executive chef at *Nick & Toni’s* in East**

Hampton, N.Y.—“We’re spoiled, and very wasteful in our eating habits. The Europeans use everything.”

• **Tracy O’Grady, chef/owner at *Willow* in Arlington, Va.**—“We’ve become accustomed to primary cuts. And we don’t really connect with the food. So much now comes out of a can or is frozen or processed. There’s also just a lack of understanding about variety meats—you need a certain skill level to master cooking them. A lot of people don’t try at home and so aren’t familiar with them when they see offal on the menu. They go to what they know.”

delicious,” Fournier says. He braises the dekkel in veal stock.

The marrow bones are the femur bones, cut down to 5 inches. They’re rolled in olive oil, garlic, shallot and parsley. After being salted, the bones are roasted in the oven to loosen the marrow, about 7 to 10 minutes. For service, the bones are heated through in the oven.

The accompanying crostini is made from grilled Italian bread with capers, gold leaf, olive oil, lemon juice and a bit of Parmesan.

“The waitstaff knows when I’m into something, so they really make an effort,” says Fournier.

At Nick & Toni’s, Realmuto finishes a saffron risotto with bone marrow. “Bone marrow is so rich that a little goes a long way, and it’s a great way to introduce something new,” he says.

He steams the bones in a hotel

pan with beef stock, fresh herbs and garlic. He removes the marrow, and tops his saffron risotto with it.

No guts, no glory

“You get a whole new line of product when you use the fifth quarter,” says Chris Cosentino, chef at San Francisco’s Incanto. To call Cosentino an offal fanatic is an understatement. He menus beef hearts and testicles, cockscombs and tripe. Indeed, he features a fifth-quarter tasting menu and an annual “head-to-tail” dinner.

“Sometimes lamb kidneys are a hard sell. Other nights I’ll sell 10 orders. I menu balls with bacon and capers, seared in a bit of butter,” says Cosentino. “I don’t do it for shock value. I’m here to educate.”

His salesmanship of offal stems from a deep commitment to sustainability. “People talk about sustain-

able foods, but not sustainable eating. You’ve got sustainable leeks, but you throw away the tops. How long have we been throwing away these cuts of meat?” he says.

How does he get his customers to try these dishes, such as his beef heart *tartare puttanesca*, or his suet pudding with chocolate-blood gelato?

“People are a lot more willing to try than you think. Some are squeamish, not wanting to make that connection back to themselves,” says Cosentino. “Eating offal forces diners to identify more closely with the animal they’re consuming. They may not want to, but we need to do that. If they get that connection, then their respect for the food source will go up.” □

Katie Ayoub is based in Keswick, Ontario, Canada. She is editor-in-chief of our sister publication, Sizzle.



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