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Food and Culture

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Tongue and Taste: Below the Brow

Throughout history, certain cuts of meat have been reserved just for the wealthy, upper cuts of beef, pork, and lamb symbolic of the upper-class elite. Eating ‘high on the hog’ signals capital, of both the economic and cultural varieties Pierre Bourdieu defines. Muscular cuts of meat are not only expensive but coded to carry another value along with that of the dollar. Filet medallions plated slightly off-center on hand thrown ceramic dishes with a smear of wine reduction along the edge are worth a thousand words: I know good food, I eat good food, and I share it with my suit-donning husband in our ample leisure time. *I have Good Taste.*

What remains after the rib and loin are cut away, in most countries, is either discarded or left for the working class. Sweetbread, chitterlings, kidney, brains, and head cheese are undesirable to many consumers, even repulsive. Organ meats historically cost less, deeming them lowbrow under Bourdieu’s framework. In his Food Space, offal would fall in the lower right quadrant, indicating both negative cultural and economic capital. They’re rich, fatty, coarse, and deeply nourishing. Their density and nutritional content are fit for the working body, not the one that lives in leisure. By Bourdieu’s definition, these parts of the animal lack value. But eating tip to tail is a skill, an artform, a practice of reverence, and often a necessity—another appreciation of cultural capital. Organ meats are used for holiday dishes and special occasions. The low economic value of entrails may be fairly universal, but its cultural value varies greatly over

history and geography. Offal is a staple to Jewish, Chinese, Mexican, Argentine, and Spanish cuisine, among many others. Foie gras and pâté are considered delicacies, tastes of luxury, though heart, feet, and tongue are reliably cheap. Taste, value, and cultural appraisal are malleable.

Today, offal meats have resurfaced and even signal high cultural capital. Not only are they widely accepted in certain culinary subcultures, with the rise of ketogenic and paleo diets, but fine-dining chefs have been working to resurrect (or retain) the long-tabooed traditions of organ and entrail preparation. Javi Estéves opened Madrid's offal-centric La Tasquería in 2015 and received his first Michelin star four years later. His mission? To modernize the traditional practice of offal consumption and make it accessible to anyone and everyone. In La Tasquería, platters are proudly walked out of their open-plan kitchen with whole, fried pigs' heads. Here, the juxtaposition is clear and felt: classically peasant dishes prepared and consumed in this contemporarily elegant restaurant. Out comes a stoneware serving dish with paper-thin veal tongue, pickled and topped with shaved almonds and microgreens. The historically inexpensive cut of meat takes on an entirely new identity on Estévez's menu. These same foods, once negated by the middle class and wholly dismissed by gentry, are being drastically reevaluated.

St. JOHN, another Long Michelin-starred restaurant in London highlights British entrail recipes; the establishment opened in 1994 and got its star in 2009. In Hong Kong, Temple Street Beef Offal has been serving organ meat since 1968, where it's considered a delicacy; the eatery is named in Michelin's restaurant guide. Michelin, a trusted arbiter of taste, labeled these locations and their fares as valuable. La Tasquería has thirty-two thousand followers on Instagram. St. JOHN has over two hundred sixty thousand. In today's social and cultural currency, most would

call that wealth. Indeed, diners that photograph, tag, and publicly showcase themselves onsite at these locations trade in that currency as well. The cultural capital a proof of visit affords attendees is vast: adventurous-eater points, curiosity credibility, stamps in a passport for those traveling from overseas. How has a historically peasant dish, deeply associated with poor taste, been reappraised to signal wealth, good taste, and elegance?

Nose-to-tail cooking was a necessity for much of its existence. By using the whole animal, particularly the parts that were within the working class grocery budget, waste was limited and society stayed fed. Today, the practice serves an environmental function as well as an egalitarian one. Resources are evermore scarce, and many consumers are choosing climate-friendly diets that make the best use of them. There is a reemerging reverence for animal life that encourages consumption of all parts, as well as an urgency to consume responsibly. Farm to table eating is a trend, or movement, that carries significant cultural capital—and requires sufficient funds. Restaurants that tag themselves as 'farm to table' dining spend more operationally, charge eaters quite a bit more and, in doing so, cater only to the wealthy. The efforts may be noble—to demand and participate in an environmentally sustainable food system—and widely publicized, but are only available to certain groups of society. A tension appears with this shift in consumer behavior as well: with the resurgence of a meal featuring my private chef, and then I'm on a job well OK let's word for awful meet in Spain and many Latin American countries writing it don't be with this shift in a consumer behavior as well with a resurgence of and then I'm on a job well OK, let's work for awful meet in Spain and then leg writing it. Don't be with this shit too behavior as well with a resurgence of a meal, featuring my private chef, and then meet in Spain appears yeah a resurgence of a meal whole-animal eating, home cooks and restaurant diners that can afford to do so are yes challenging exploitative norms within the food system, seeking

nourishing foods that sustain the working body. Almost ironically, the wealthy elite can point to their virtuous shopping and dining habits from within their glass houses. Over a meal featuring Long Island duck pâté prepared by private chefs in an Amagansett beach house, those that hold the highest economic capital brandish their cultural riches and congratulate themselves on a job well done.

Casquería is the Spanish word for offal meat. In Spain and many Latin American countries, preparation of casquería is common and revered within working class communities, but throughout time, the bourgeoisie have turned their noses up to these dishes. Casquería shows up in *asados,* or barbecues, and as standalone dishes. A popular Argentine dish served Christmas Eve is *lengua a la vinagreta,* or beef tongue marinated in vinegar. Within Bourdieu's matrix, this preparation of organ meat would lack both cultural and economic value: tongue is the cheapest cut, incredibly coarse, and a staple on working class dining room tables. But outside of his framework, it holds deep cultural significance, and has now increased so much in price that the working class can no longer afford it. Lengua a la vinagreta is a dish that Argentine women have spent many years preparing with great care, gingerly peeling away the skin once it's come down to room temperature after an hour and a half boiled. The marinade calls for half a liter of vegetable oil and a quarter liter white vinegar, aromatics and finely chopped parsley, sweet pepper flakes and bell peppers for garnish. Overnight, the tongue marinates refrigerated, allowing working women to cook while they sleep.

Today, Argentine *abuelas* are buying lengua in October to freeze until Christmas Eve—because its price will only soar. Despite its rising cost, lengua is an essential holiday dish and will not be absent from my abuela's holiday table. Ritual and history add value to foods. Generations using

the same recipe invigorate it with cultural capital, but this currency has no role in Bourdieu's Food Space. His analysis not only falls short where sentimentality is concerned, but cannot be accurately applied to the dramatically fluctuating financial cost and societal value of different foods. He leaves room for adaptability, and this speaks to Bourdieu's own inner conflict; like lengua today, he is neither *of* the working class, or *of* the taste-defining class. He exists somewhere in between and around them, almost conveniently dressed up or dressed down for the occasion. I imagine he would fit right in at Estévez's La Tasquería, suit jacket on with a white collared shirt underneath, top button undone. He would share his own about eating offal meat as a child, when they couldn't afford the finer cuts.

Foods carry their own identity, and with that identity is a dollar value and a cultural one—both of these change over time and space. Organ meats once symbolized modesty and poor taste. They were scowled at and it was understood that those who ate them did so because they had no other choice. Today, they are sought out. For their myriad health benefits, for their eye towards animal welfare, for their cultural cache of wordly eating. Peasant foods have gained a newfound popularity and respect, particularly from bearded chefs in canvas and leather aprons. By tastemakers' standards, those chefs are cutting edge. They're elevating once-forgotten cuisines. They're bringing a bright freshness to traditionally heavy dishes. They have good taste, and they're making your grandmother's lengua a la vinagreta appealing to the masses. Their persistent use of once-affordable ingredients has priced Indigenous or communities of color out of their local purveyors and grocery lists. It's altered how and where crops are grown, who owns those lands, and who gets to eat from them. What, then, would Bourdieu say about that? Who picks up the check then?