

Looking beneath the stories we tell ourselves
about the meat we (do and do not) eat.

A Genealogy of Offal

TEXT Jonah Campbell

But there is nothing more useless than an organ.

*When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions
and restored him to his true freedom.*

*Then you will teach him again to dance wrong side out
as in the frenzy of dance halls
and this wrong side out will be his real place.*

—Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done With the Judgement of God*, 1947



Spring is in the air, the Ides are behind us, and accordingly, I have been eating a lot of snow crab. I have also been eating a lot of snow crab brains—or what we in a somewhat broken euphemism refer to as brains, but which are in fact a much more varied and unspecific assortment of organs and indistinguishable visceral miscellany. The stuff itself is sweet, marine, and distinctly crabby, a dour but not totally unappetizing grey-green colour (you turn up your nose, but olives are grey-green and we like them just fine). It is specifically prized—raw or cooked—as *kani miso* in Japanese cuisine, but on YouTube you can watch crab fishermen expertly dismembering and, with a flick of the wrist, tossing the whole heads overboard. No point in hauling dead weight, it’s gurry all the way down.

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If you have been paying the least bit of attention to Western culinary culture in the past decade or two, you will no doubt have heard the triumphant horns proclaiming the return of offal. Not only is it increasingly a fixture of “farm-to-table” fine dining, but it also figures prominently in the realms of food tourism and televised “adventure eating.” There has been a

steady stream of offal advocacy in cookbooks and magazines. You will inevitably encounter some variation of: organ meats, long shunned by diners as a marker of low social status, poverty, or rural, unsophisticated upbringing, BUT a new generation of savvy chefs and eaters are rescuing such cuts from the literal and figurative dustbins of history.

You are also likely to read that organ meats are considered delicacies in many cultures, and indeed have long been sought after by gourmands, royals, and aristocrats the world over. You may have read of Roman emperors hunting larks and nightingales for their tongues alone, of the three Great Rare Tastes of Japan (*uni* [urchin gonads], sea cucumber entrails, and mullet roe), of Byzantine banquets of boned kids’ heads stuffed with borage, or of the relatively banal yet perennially controversial foie gras. These litanies of spectacular consumption are presented blithely alongside statements about offal as a little uncouth and marked by unsavoury economic associations, and yet rarely does anyone attend to that glaring paradox of how it is that offal can be considered at once “poor people food” while also being prized and appreciated by effectively all cultures, for all of human existence.

There is surely an explanation for this, or more likely several. In the 1940s, we are told, the United States government convened a multidisciplinary Committee on Food Habits (famously chaired by renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead) to study and strategize how best to convince Americans at home to embrace offal, ostensibly the meat that the soldiers abroad would not even eat. Fair enough, though I cannot but wonder how the rank and file of the U.S. Army, made up of so many working-class Black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Polish, Italian, Filipino, Lebanese, Scottish, Chinese, Japanese, and Native American soldiers suddenly became so finicky in their habits, forgetting the chitlins, trotters, menudo, haggis, and so on, they had so enjoyed before the war? We may also consider the more recent effects of industrialized meat production and the correspondent deskilling of butchery, as supermarkets and convenience cooking came to reshape the culinary landscape, though I cannot help feeling such narratives tend to put the cart before the horse.



At the moment, however, it is not so much the explanation itself that interests me as what the widespread indifference to the need for such an explanation might say about our limited historical imagination. Instead of attempting to unpack offal's inherent paradoxes, to understand how its tragic fall from culinary grace could have been catalyzed, we are given just-so stories, a sort of unspoken circular reasoning that goes as follows: offal is stigmatized because of poor people, poor people ate offal because it was cheap, it was cheap because offal was less prized than "prime cuts," offal is less prized because offal is gross. In other words, offal is stigmatized because offal is gross. After all, haven't you ever seen the stuff? But if it is so gross, why, then, has it been so universally, trans-historically popular?

We fall easily into the trap of following this reasoning not because it satisfactorily fills the gaps in the historical narrative, but because it flatters our contemporary prejudices: We have learned to find offal gross, gross-smelling, gross-feeling, a gross reminder of the origins of meat and that animals are not just a bunch of steaks and fillets taped together. We call it an "acquired taste" in glib disregard of our knowledge that all tastes (short of mother's milk, perhaps) are acquired, and in order to free ourselves of the burden of acknowledging that things could be otherwise—that our acquired disgust is not itself a first principle. It is dangerous and unsettling to allow that our distastes, too, are acquired. Because if you can't trust your gut, who can you trust?

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Offal is an odd word. We think we know what we mean by offal. Of course, it is not a stable, sturdy ontological category in its own right, but a relational term, and pieces of animal anatomy slip back and forth across that great divide on the regular. Sausages and pork belly are accepted unblinkingly (although the latter only recently), tripe and tongue not so much. Liver is an inveterate fence-sitter, while oysters—the ultimate experience of "whole beast" eating—hardly raise an eyebrow. We sometimes use, as a loose synonym, "organ meat," but that too is a misnomer because almost anything in the body that serves a



dedicated purpose can be considered an organ (the heart is a muscle the size of your fist, they say—keep loving, keep fighting).

Offal only really comes to be once we get our hands into the animals: it is the by-product of butchery, the *quinto quarto* (fifth quarter), or that which remains when the carcass is trimmed and transformed into its prime cuts (offal being by definition a subprime cut), the nasty bits. Meat is the object, offal the abject. The English etymology of the word typically recalls the Old German *abfall*, for what falls away in the trimming, the waste of making animal into meat. But contrary to what one might assume, the French *abats* derives not directly from *à + bas* (to the bottom), but comes by way of *abattre*—to vanquish, slaughter, strike down—as in *abattoir*, as in battle. Therefore in French we have the killing, but not the ranking and rating, and no internalized hierarchy. Anatomy is not destiny.

So how did the prime cuts come to be seen as so self-evidently "prime," when emperors, artists, and dirt-scrabbling peasants alike were forever feasting on cockscombs and head cheese, boudin noir and black pudding, colatura and kokoretsi, crab brains and calf's foot curry? Why do we so readily accept the

historical sleight of hand that attempts to pass off our contemporary prejudices, our rejection of certain pleasures, as only natural? I don't have a ready answer, nor am I making a plea for you to eat more offal because it is ethical or honourable or environmentally minded or otherwise en vogue, though any of those are fine reasons.

I am asking you to annihilate offal, and the just-so stories that excuse its exclusion. I'm asking you to do it for Artaud. Let the animal become a body without organs, to deliver us from our automatic reactions. This wrong side out will be his real place, all spacious singing flesh. Embrace the true paradox of offal, by which once desired, it no longer exists. ■

→ **Jonah Campbell** is a writer, researcher, and sometimes wine-pusher based in Montréal. His writing has appeared in *Harper's*, *Maisonneuve*, *enRoute*, the *National Post*, and *BioSocieties*. He is the author of two volumes of essays, *Eaten Back to Life* (Invisible, 2017) and *Food and Trembling* (Invisible, 2011).