

Cooking Corner: Eat these traditional foods fast, before you lose your appetite

by Peter Rowe

Two cheeses, actually: a soft brie and a Casu Marzu — also known as Sardinian maggot cheese for the larvae whose nonstop nosing brings this formaggio to an advanced state of fermentation.

A sausage patty tops the notorious Scottish dish haggis, served here with radishes and fried potatoes. Photo by Peggy Peattie. Lye — yes, the caustic stuff used to make soap - is one of the ingredients necessary to prepare lutefisk. Photo by Eduardo Contreras. Is one "good" and the other "bad"? Or, to avoid moral judgments, is one delicious and the other disgusting? How we answer these questions says more about our expectations and backgrounds than it does about the relative merits of particular dishes.

Except in rare cases — cannibalism, say, and perhaps Jack in the Box's Double Bacon and Cheese Ciabatta Burger (1,120 calories, 76 grams of fat) — food is about cultural norms and taste, not morality. One person's filet mignon is another person's boiled sheep's head.

Wherever you live and whatever you eat, though, some dishes are more unusual than others. We recently set out to try two foods known to strike, if not terror, at least trepidation in the hearts of diners.

Grab a fork, some Tums and your minimum daily requirement of culinary curiosity as we dig into haggis and lutefisk.

LUST FOR LUTEFISK

The legend: This fabled Norwegian delicacy starts as ordinary dried cod. But a long bath in lye — yes, the caustic stuff that's used to make soap — gives the fish a slick, gummy consistency. The finished product is often served in hefty slabs drowning in butter and white sauce.

People really eat this? Reeking of nostalgia, lutefisk is often associated with church dinners and immigrant grandparents. In a casual survey of the San Diego Sons of Norway, half liked the dish and half saw it as a triumph of tradition over taste.

Don't try this at home: Not, that is, without expert assistance. While you can find recipes in specialty cookbooks and online, novices may wish to call on the Olsen Fish Co.'s Lutefisk Hotline: (800) 882-0212.

GAG US WITH HAGGIS

The legend: This Scottish classic consists of sheep's liver mixed with suet, onions and oatmeal, then boiled inside the poor creature's stomach.

"You know chopped liver? You know that taste?" asked Andrew Rhodes, a magazine ad salesman who visited The Linkery, a San Diego restaurant, specifically for this dish. "It's like a darker version of that." Others found the iron-rich liver notes less pronounced; in appearance and flavor, this haggis tasted like a tomato-free Sloppy Joe.

People really eat this? While touring Scotland, Dan Zieber and Laura Bost tried haggis. They liked it, which shocked their hosts. "There it's considered a crazy anachronism," Zieber said, "something for the tourists."

Don't try this at home: Unless you're eager to chance canned haggis, sold online by several companies. Caledonian Kitchen, for instance, offers a Scottish Haggis With Sirloin Beef, \$7.99 per can (caledonianskitchen.com).

One reason you seldom see haggis on the menu is because of how difficult it can be to find sheep paunch, lamb's liver and suet. But if you are determined to give it a try, a sheep farmer or butcher would be a good place to start.

TRADITIONAL HAGGIS

1 Sheep's paunch (stomach)

1 pound lamb's liver

1 large onion

2 pounds dry oatmeal

1 pound suet, shredded (beef fat)

1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon nutmeg

1 teaspoon mace

1/2 teaspoon salt

Yields 12 servings.

Pull sheep's paunch shaggy side out and thoroughly scrape it clean (see note), keeping care not to puncture organ. Pull it back smooth side out.

In 4-quart pot with 3 to 4 cups water, boil liver for 30 minutes and parboil onion for 2 minutes. Remove liver and onion. Retain 2 1/2 cups of liver stock.

Mince together liver and onion.

Over medium heat in heavy-bottomed pan, lightly toast oatmeal.

In mixing bowl, mix together oatmeal, liver, onion, suet, cayenne and black peppers, nutmeg, mace, salt and reserved stock. Fill paunch with mixture, pressing it down to remove air. Sew up natural openings in paunch securely with kitchen twine. Wrap paunch in cheesecloth for ease of handling when finished cooking. When finished cooking, use cheesecloth as a sling to remove haggis in one piece.

Prick paunch so it won't burst during cooking. Place haggis in about 2 gallons of boiling water and boil gently for 4 to 5 hours.

Note: Even if the butcher has cleaned the paunch, you will probably want to clean it again. Turn paunch shaggy side out and rinse. Rub it in a sink full of cold water. Drain water and repeat until water stays pretty clear and handling paunch does not produce much sediment as water drains from sink.

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