

U.S.

# In California, Going All Out to Bid Adieu to Foie Gras

By **ADAM NAGOURNEY** OCT. 15, 2011

LOS ANGELES — A line of people streamed into an unmarked, dimly lighted storefront on Fairfax Avenue as night fell Friday, on a mash-up Los Angeles block catering to religious Jews and hungry hipsters. Before long, a smattering of protesters arrived.

Behind the glass doors, an act of culinary defiance was taking place.

In eight months, the sale of foie gras will be banned in California. But for seven hours on Friday night, at a restaurant appropriately known as *Animal*, three chefs presented an eight-course meal that was nothing short of a glorification of this soon-to-be-outlawed delicacy. There was smoked foie gras, roasted foie gras, steamed foie gras and liquefied foie gras, injected into agnolotti. It was served with veal tongue, yogurt, prosciutto, mustard ice cream and truffles. There was even a foie gras dessert: a brownie sundae with foie gras Chantilly.

With all its gluttonous excess, and with the backdrop of the animal rights protesters, the sold-out dinner became the fattiest of food as political protest, offering a clash of competing passions in a battle that has reverberated across the nation but finally settled here, the first state in the nation to criminalize the sale of foie gras, the fattened liver of a goose or a duck.

It was also a perhaps belated realization by these chefs and their fans that a law signed eight years ago is truly taking effect and is about to change the way they do

business drastically, putting California on the front lines of the battle about force-feeding ducks and geese to produce the silky liver delicacy.

“I want people to have the freedom to eat what they want,” said Ludo Lefebvre, one of the chefs behind the stove here on Friday. “Animal rights people would turn everyone into a **vegan** if they could. I don’t want animal rights people to tell me what to eat. Today it’s foie gras. Tomorrow it’s going to be chicken, or beef.”

He continued: “Foie gras is one of the greatest ingredients, a French delicacy. I was born and raised with foie gras. It’s like if you took kimchi away from the Korean people.”

Mr. Lefebvre’s views were echoed by diners — many of whom said they worked in the food industry, including a representative from a foie gras producer — as they walked in the door. “There is a lot of misinformation out there,” said Tom Feher, 29, a Los Angeles lawyer. “These animals are not mistreated. The last thing you’d want to do is mistreat an animal which you’re using to produce a luxury ingredient such as foie gras.”

This is not the first time a community has tried to ban foie gras. It was outlawed in Chicago in 2006, producing a backlash from restaurants that, speakeasy-like, served foie gras secretly. The ban lasted barely two years.

“There was this sense of embarrassment, like here was the City Council intervening in restaurant menus,” said Mark Caro, a Chicago Tribune journalist who wrote a book, “The Foie Gras Wars,” about the failed effort.

But the California law was approved overwhelmingly, and support for it appears as strong as ever. And on the other side, there is nothing short of a cultlike following for the white-toqued leaders in the kitchen Friday: Mr. Lefebvre, who has pioneered pop-up restaurants across the country, and the two Animal chefs, Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo.

Mr. Shook said the 320 spots for the “You Gotta Fight for Your Right to Foie!” dinners on Friday and Saturday night sold out in 16 minutes; four telephone operators were assigned to deal with the crush.

And that was at \$175 a head for food alone, with an additional \$50 for a wine, beer and Champagne pairing.

There was never much doubt that the night — every dish invented for the evening, on a menu that was kept secret until the last minute — would be daring and gastronomically gratifying, if a bit overwhelming. (Many diners were comparing themselves to the aforementioned ducks as they waddled out.) Whether it will have any political impact seems dubious.

“Good for them,” John L. Burton, the former state legislator who sponsored the bill, said when told about the dinner-as-political-protest. “If you give me the address of the restaurant, I’ll be outside selling Lipitor so they don’t all get heart attacks. This is like what they did before Prohibition: Everyone was giving away the booze. Whatever makes them happy.”

Animal rights activists dismissed the event as an exercise in futility.

“This is a rather embarrassing temper tantrum on the part of these chefs; the bill will take effect whether they like it or not,” said Lindsay Rajt, an associate director with the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. “The idea of paying upwards of \$100 to eat pieces of a diseased organ would be laughably funny to most people if it didn’t involve cramming pipes down birds’ throats and painfully force-feeding them.”

Members of the Animal Protection League showed up on Friday to picket the dinner, holding signs in front of the windows aimed at the buzzing young crowd, which showed up even before the doors opened, and was served by heavily tattooed waiters.

“Most people attending are not as concerned about animal cruelty as the general public is,” said Bryan W. Pease, the founder of the organization. “But I don’t see any possibility of the ban being repealed.”

California is ahead of the curve in its appetite for both eating and regulating exotic food. This month Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation banning the sale of shark fin soup, and a sushi restaurant in Santa Monica shut down last year after

being charged with illegally serving whale.

Foie gras has inspired a more passionate argument, with both sides producing experts and videotapes arguing over the cruelty of how the geese and ducks are fed. Marion Nestle, a professor of food studies and public health at New York University, said that she viewed the California law as excessive.

“What’s being regulated here?” she asked. “You are denying people the food that people in some countries have been eating for generations. They don’t believe the process of fattening up the ducks or geese is painful to the ducks or geese. I’ve seen the videos, and everyone says the same thing: they all seem to run up to be fed.”

She continued: “The question is whether you believe that the killing of animals for food for people is acceptable. It’s a moral judgment. You have an ethical slippery slope here.”

And of course, there is the pure-pleasure argument that patrons made. “Foie gras is probably one of my favorite things in the world,” said Alexandra Snukal, 30, who lives in Santa Monica.

The owners seemed resigned to the likelihood that they had been outflanked by the animal rights lobby, even as they handed out cards addressed “to the citizens of California” demanding repeal of the law. “At the end of the day, they have already won,” Mr. Shook said, his voice downcast. “This ban has already gone into effect. Our one dinner is not going to make it turn around.”

Violators of the law will face fines of up to \$1,000 a day. But Mr. Lefebvre said he was already cooking up ways to work around this latest prohibition. “Maybe I’m going to change the name,” he said. “Call it duck liver. Call it pâté. But I’ll find a way. People like foie gras.”

Ian Lovett contributed reporting.

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