

MODERN FOODIE CULTURE

A Celebration of Violence

by *Robert C. Jones, Ph.D.*

“A true gastronome is as insensible to suffering as a conqueror.”—Abraham Hayward¹

The 2011 Sydney Writers’ Festival featured late British food critic A.A. Gill and late American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain in conversation with restaurateur Tony Bilson. A significant part of that discussion involves the trio ridiculing advocates of animal rights.² Decrying animal rights as a “false morality,” Bilson—completely unaware of the unoriginality of his hoary critique—castigates animal rights advocates for what he sees as a misanthropic concern favoring animals at a time when countless human beings suffer. (Apparently, he cannot imagine a person being *both* an animal and human rights advocate). Bilson’s comment prompts the following exchange:

Gill: Well, I don’t know if it’s a false morality, I just don’t agree with it. I also don’t really care if animals suffer. If I’m perfectly honest, I don’t give a shit!

Bourdain: (laughs) I’d rather not see it.

Gill: Once you’ve heard one pig scream, the second one’s easier.

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Bourdain: And he's right . . . you learn something about yourself when you kill a pig!

Putting aside the invective, their arrogance, condescension, ignorance, and revealing macho swagger, I want to instead concentrate on their *attitude*, a certain despicable indifference to the suffering and death of animals slaughtered for food. Not only their indifference, but the giddy, mocking, sadistic pleasure they seem to take in the suffering of nonhuman food animals. It is that attitude—an attitude not necessarily emblematic of foodie culture, but not entirely foreign to it either—that I'd like to discuss in this chapter. At the heart of such attitudes lurks the human prejudice, a human supremacy, a “speciesism,” expressed in beliefs and behaviors (as well as societal practices and institutions) that hold that nonhuman animals are ours to use, to do with as we see fit.

In researching for this chapter, I found myself struggling to formulate a clear and precise definition of the term foodie, while simultaneously grappling to identify those most morally debased characteristics of foodie culture. However, as philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein taught us, trying to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper application of a given term is a fool's errand; the best we can hope for is a “family resemblance.”³ To that end, here is a kind of rough-and-ready definition: A foodie is a kind of gourmand, a gastronome, an enthusiast who, for aesthetic reasons, purports to have an ardent or refined interest in food, who seeks new food experiences as a kind of hobby rather than simply eating for convenience or from hunger, and who is “willing to spend a considerable portion of his or her expendable income and time exploring, studying, and sampling food, with special interest in the pleasures of the tastes.” Further, there is a certain kind of foodie—the person who gives “priority to their personal quest for interesting and delicious tastes over moral and health concerns”—who is the focus of this chapter.⁴

I further tried to get clear on those aspects of foodie culture—specifically those related to animals as food—that I find most morally objectionable. To that end, I devised the following rough taxonomic family resemblance. I have formulated four, non-exhaustive, loose distinctions I refer to as *moral-belief states* in relation to the treatment

of animals used as food—including their flesh, bodily secretions, and zygote-containing roe—that describe the moral stance a person takes vis-à-vis the consumption of animal products. I employ (as philosophers are wont to do) a term of art in describing these four states, specifically, the term *akrasia*, from the Greek meaning “a weakness of the will; to act in a way contrary to one’s sincerely held moral values.” The four moral-belief states I wish to discuss in relation to foodie culture are as follows:

FOUR MORAL BELIEF STATES

1. *Non-Akratic Ignorance*

Individuals in this moral-belief state are ignorant of the moral issues surrounding the suffering and death of animals for food, and so experience no weakness of the will when trying to avoid consuming animal products since they don’t try. Not because they are bad people, but because they are ignorant of the conditions under which nonhuman animals are raised as food. Some readers may find it unimaginable that there exist adult humans who remain ignorant of the plight of nonhuman animals used for food. However, a 2017 study found that despite decades of undercover investigations—including graphic video evidence, ubiquitous on the internet—58% of U.S. adults think that “farmed animals are treated well.” The authors of the study interpret these results as suggesting that people either have insufficient awareness of the plight of food industry animals, or they just refuse to accept the evidence.⁵

The notion of consumer ignorance is even more complicated than might appear at first blush. A 2016 Dutch study examining consumer indifference toward meat eating focused on two types of people: (a) consumers who do not care and, therefore, ignore the issue, and (b) consumers who may care but strategically *choose* to ignore the issue.⁶ The latter group (b)—the so-called “strategically ignorant consumers”—suffer from a kind of confirmation bias in which they *strategically ignore* information concerning the ethics of consuming animal products. Though fascinating, persons afflicted with non-akratic ignorance are not my focus here.

2. *Akratic Non-Ignorance*

Sadly, akratic non-ignorance is a rather common moral-belief state. Though individuals in this moral-belief state feel that the production and consumption of (at least some) animal products are morally problematic, they nevertheless suffer *akrasia*—weakness of will—when trying to resist, and therefore continue to consume animal products. These are folks the Dutch study refers to as “struggling consumers,” those meat eaters with negative feelings toward meat consumption, yet with low scores on willingness to ignore and positive scores on perceived responsibility.⁷ As with the first moral-belief state, those in this group are interesting, yet not my focus here.

3. *Non-Akratic Non-Ignorance*

Individuals in this moral-belief state believe that the production and consumption of animal products is *not* morally problematic, thus they suffer no weakness of the will when it comes to avoiding animal products since they see no moral reason to do so. This person is cognizant of and accepts the suffering of animals as a consequence (perhaps an unfortunate consequence) of food production and consumption. They believe the production and consumption of animal products is not morally problematic, usually for at least one of four reasons (known as the “4Ns”)—namely, that the consumption of animal products is (a) normal; (b) natural; (c) necessary; or (d) nice.⁸ This, too, is a common moral-belief state. Persons in this state recognize that animals suffer and die in food production. While they do not think that suffering and death are necessarily good things, they do accept the suffering as a necessary part of food production and perhaps even part of the “cycle of life.” They also tend to have an attitude of speciesism, believing the superiority of humans and our right to use nonhuman animals as we see fit. People in this moral-belief state are often opposed to “factory farms” and industrialized food production methods. They may even express this opposition by purchasing only “locally produced,” “artisanal,” “humane” animal products. This category includes people like Michael Pollan and many others who self-identify as foodies.

4. *Sadistic Non-Akratic Non-Ignorance*

Like the third moral-belief state, the fourth moral-belief state involves non-akratic non-ignorance, but with a twist I call sadistic non-akratic non-ignorance. Like persons in the non-akratic non-ignorance moral-belief state, those in the sadistic non-akratic non-ignorance state believe that the production and consumption of animal products is not morally problematic. However, the crucial moral difference between the two is that persons in this moral-belief state reject that the suffering of animals is unfortunate. This rejection can manifest itself in myriad ways, including (a) indifference to the suffering and killing of “food animals”; (b) the mocking of the animals and their suffering and killing; and (c) in some cases, a celebration of the suffering and killing of animals. In these cases, knowledge of the animals’ suffering actually adds to the exotic, hedonistic, debauched dining pleasure. For sadistic foodies, not only do taste preference and palate satisfaction trump all competing considerations, including issues of animal suffering or even animal welfare, but the addition of animal suffering in food preparation *increases* the foodie capital of the dish, the dining experience, and even themselves. Unlike other kinds of foodies, sadistic foodies relish the fact that animals had to suffer and die for their gustatory pleasure.

Particularly for sadistic foodies, the pursuit of new food experiences is best interpreted as an artifact of affluence, and in many ways is ultimately about power, prestige, and privilege—power over the animal, the food producers, the servers, etc.; prestige with other foodies and aspiring foodies; and the privilege to afford to seek out novel and exotic food and drink. Sadistic foodies can appear absolved from all moral culpability since moral culpability is hidden behind the fact that these practices are culturally, socially, and legally sanctioned, encouraged, and even aspired to. In light of this discussion, it should be clear that folks like A.A. Gill and Anthony Bourdain are paradigm cases of sadistic foodies. For these reasons, sadistic foodie culture is particularly morally debased, especially regarding the plight of animals used as food.

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MUSINGS ON MURDER

Examples of sadistic foodies are ubiquitous. Describing her experience cooking lobster, Julie Powell, author of the best-selling *Julie & Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*, writes:

Over a period of two weeks . . . I went on a murderous rampage. I committed gruesome, atrocious acts. . . . If news of the carnage was not widely remarked upon in the local press, it was only because my victims were not Catholic schoolgirls or Filipino nurses, but crustaceans. This distinction means that I am not a murderer in the legal sense. But I have blood on my hands, even if it is the clear blood of lobsters. People say lobsters make a terrible racket in the pot, trying-reasonably enough to claw their way out of the water. I wouldn't know. I spent the next twenty minutes watching a golf game on the TV with the volume turned up. . . . When I ventured back into the kitchen, the lobsters were very red, and not making any racket at all. . . . Poor little beasties.⁹

Commenting on these passages, B. R. Myers notes in *The Atlantic*:

This is a prime example of foodies' hostility to the very language of moral values. In mocking and debasing it, they exert, with Madison Avenue's help, a baleful influence on American English as a whole. If words like "sinful" and "decadent" are now just a cutesy way of saying "delicious but fattening," so that any serious use of them marks the speaker as a crank, and if it is more acceptable to talk of the "evils of gluten" than of the "evils of gluttony," much of the blame must be laid at their doorstep.¹⁰

The indifference to animal suffering is only exacerbated by the mockery and sarcasm, a staple of sadistic foodie culture. The faux light-hearted sneering, the scornful, condescending laughter at the wanton suffering and death of these sentient beings for no reason other than the gustatory satisfaction of the sadistic foodie's will to power, reflects a kind of schadenfreude on steroids that is shameful. Feminist and author Carol J. Adams maintains that expressions of laughter at animal suffering indicate just how successful the animal rights movement has become. What was once acceptable—the suffering and death of food animals—is

no longer so. But rather than assimilating the lessons of the animal rights movement, we instead laugh at and mock animal death, making the unacceptable once again acceptable.¹¹

Further examples of sadistic foodie culture abound. In *Blood, Bones & Butter*, Gabrielle Hamilton's reverent tone belies her ghoulish glee as she recounts her sadistic carnage:

It's quite something to go bare-handed up through an animal's ass and dislodge its warm guts. Startling, the first time, how fragilely they are attached. I have since put countless suckling pigs—pink, with blue, querying eyes—the same weight and size of a pet beagle—into slow ovens to roast overnight so that their skin crisps and their still-forming bones melt into the meat, making it succulent and sticky. I have butchered two-hundred-twenty-pound sides of beef down to their primal cuts, carved the tongues out of the heads of goats, fastened whole baby lambs with crooked sets of teeth onto green ash spits and set them by the foursome over hot coals, and boned out the loins and legs of whole rabbits that—even skinned—still look exactly like bunnies. But at the time of the chicken killing, I was still young and unaccustomed. I retrieved the bird off the frozen ground and tied its feet and hung it from a low tree branch so it could bleed out. . . . Once the bird bled out, I submerged it in boiling water to loosen its feathers. . . . Its viscera came out with an easy tug; a small palmful of livery, bloody jewels that I tossed out into the dark yard.¹²

I imagine that such graphic descriptions of what amount to the total and utter disregard for the suffering and death of a sentient being—not to mention the objectification and fragmentation of the body of the slaughtered chicken—are intended to elicit feelings of respect, awe, and admiration. When in fact, more appropriate moral sentiments would include horror, incredulity, and nausea.

In a 2015 article from *The Guardian*, we learn that:

Noma's Japanese restaurant serves up a rare treat. . . . The world's best restaurant has opened a pop-up in Tokyo and its still-twitching, slightly gruesome menu, has critics salivating. . . . [T]he celebrated chef behind Noma, Rene Redzepi, has upped the sushi

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and seasoning stakes with a creation featuring live jumbo prawns, topped with tiny black ants. At Noma Tokyo, perched on the 37th floor of the Mandarin Oriental hotel with views of Mount Fuji in the distance, the presence of half a dozen ants clinging to the wobbling flesh of each prawn is more than just a visual gimmick. With their natural reserves of formic acid, the ants give the botan ebi—or botan prawn—a sour kick. . . . In her review for *Bloomberg*, Tejal Rao recalled being confronted by a “pristine shrimp . . . so recently dead that its brain has yet to telegraph this information to the rest of its body. For now . . . it’s all twitching muscle and whirring antennae.” After regaining her composure, Rao described the sensation of biting into the prawn as “shockingly good.”¹³

In the bestselling *Anything That Moves: Renegade Chefs, Fearless Eaters, and the Making of a New American Food Culture*, journalist and foodie Dana Goodyear chronicles (sadistic) foodie culture, writing:

“It’s not Bacchanalian, it’s Caligulan!” the woman to my left exclaimed one night at Totoraku, an invitation-only, all-beef restaurant in Los Angeles, as course after course of raw beef came to the table. She was a member of a dining group that calls itself the Hedonists. On my right, another Hedonist, a Totoraku regular who had invited me along, was photographing each dish with a macrolens and macroflash. I felt obliged to gulp down as much raw beef throat as I could and made sure that I was seen doing it.¹⁴

As research for this chapter, I conducted an interview with Elsa Newman, an experienced server from the exclusive Plumed Horse restaurant, a fancy French foodie favorite in Silicon Valley. In the course of our discussion, Newman provided keen insight into the precise phenomenon that I am getting at here, “Foodieism is really a way for foodies to talk about money. It’s a disguise, a lead in for braggadocio. They don’t talk so much about the food as much as they talk about their travels and material possessions.”

On the issue of foodie sadism, Newman offered the following:

We offer two different kinds of caviar here. One is produced by rubbing the fish mother’s belly rather than cutting it open. That

kind costs \$200 an ounce versus \$90 an ounce for the run-of-the-mill caviar. When told that the difference in price is due to the fact that the belly rubbing caviar is more humane in that it doesn't hurt the mother, customers become turned off, and order the eggs from the slaughtered fish. But when you tell them that the \$200-an-ounce caviar has slight and unique accents of cucumber, customers fork over the \$200 an ounce without hesitation.¹⁵

Sadistic foodie culture is about more than food. It's about intent; it's an expression of cultural capital, economic power, power over the supply chain that must come together to make "exceptional, special dishes." As B.R. Myers notes in his brilliant 2011 tour de force takedown of (the oxymoronic) foodie ethics, "The Moral Crusade Against Foodies," "It has always been crucial to the gourmet's pleasure that he eat in ways the mainstream cannot afford. [W]hen foodies talk of flying to Paris to buy cheese, to Vietnam to sample pho . . . they're not joking about that."¹⁶

Of course, a foodie might respond to these aspects of foodie culture by pointing out that sadistic foodies are a small, elite, nonrepresentative segment of foodie culture. Most foodies are of the non-akratic non-ignorance type (moral belief state 3) who, though not indifferent to the suffering and killing of food animals, nevertheless do not see the production and consumption of animal products as morally problematic. Even Bourdain, in the discussion referenced above, tells us that he "want[s] [food] animals to live pretty happy, stress-free lives" (of course, because "they taste less delicious if they're mistreated").¹⁷ That said, I can only wonder, how many non-sadistic foodies are in reality aspiring sadistic foodies? For those that are, it would seem that the main difference between non-sadistic foodies and sadistic foodies is wealth and access. And that's morally troubling.

THE HIDDEN HUMANE HOAX BEHIND FOODIEISM

Even foodies of the Michael Pollan sort—emblematic of a popular kind of foodieism—are themselves accompanied by their own troubling moral consequences. An increased awareness of the destructive nature of animal agriculture and fishing—including environmental degradation, individual and public health threats, and the atrocious conditions under

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which animals are raised—has led to a shift in attitudes toward meat production and animal products in general. This acknowledgment, coupled with a sentimental nostalgia for a time when a majority of Europeans and Americans were farmers and craftspersons, has fed a booming alternative food movement. Known as locavorism, foodieism, compassionate carnivorousism, the sustainable meat movement, the humane meat movement, the happy meat movement, the nose-to-tail food movement, and the conscientious omnivore movement, this movement markets itself as free-range, grass-fed, organic, natural, and cage-free. For those who desire to consume animal products but are ethically troubled by industrialized animal agriculture, so-called “happy” meat, eggs, and dairy purport to offer an ethical alternative both to veganism and to the cruelty of the industrial farm, ensuring happier lives (and “humane deaths”) for animals destined to become food. Measured against the vast majority of consumers whose lack of connectedness to their food enables the near-total erasure of suffering from their plates in the form of neatly shrink-wrapped, bloodless cuts of meat, so-called “compassionate carnivore” foodies perhaps deserve praise. Yet despite this supposed concern for the animals’ lives and deaths, the details of their short and torturous lives and the brutality of their slaughter are kept secret, far from the public eye. In truth, an overwhelming majority of animals raised on “local” farms are sent to the same slaughterhouses, butchered alongside their kin raised in larger industrial settings. Animals raised in “humane” conditions are routinely overcrowded and suffer branding, dehorning, tail-docking, debeaking, castration, tooth-filing, ear-notching, and nose ring piercing, all without anesthesia.¹⁸

In “How Happy is Your Meat?: Confronting (Dis)connectedness in the ‘Alternative’ Meat Industry,” geographer Kathryn Gillespie analyzes the tension between the desire for Do-It-Yourself (DIY) butchers to forge a connection to their food by involving themselves in every step of its production (including slaughter), and the Herculean efforts they make to disconnect themselves from the actual animal they will butcher in order to avoid a sentimental or emotional attachment to the hapless victim. For many “compassionate carnivores,” the killing and eating of animals is justified by their interest in forming a consumer–food connection,

where personally taking on the death of the animal acts as a means to more ethical eating, a way of honoring the subjects of slaughter while eating them. Yet, as Gillespie points out, even Michael Pollan advises DIY butchers to quickly disconnect from what it means to slaughter an animal. Gillespie incisively characterizes this most profound disconnect in the following way:

All of the justifications for DIY slaughter as a way to connect to food, to become an artisan, to embody rusticity, and to make slaughter more humane are enlisted to conceal what the process really does. DIY slaughter connects participants to the violence against the animal, and not to the animal him/herself. This “connection” is a wholly false connection. DIY slaughter denies the actual connection we have with animals. Animals are still, in DIY slaughter, conceptualized not as individual animals but as products ready to become meat.¹⁹

A further problem with both “humane” and industrial agriculture is that they place animals in the category of the edible, ontologizing sentient beings as food. The transformation of an animal to a food object involves a kind of erasure in which a complex, sensitive being is made absent, stripped of all subjectivity, individual personality, interests, and desires (including the desire not to be harmed or killed). This ultimate and ghastly expression of speciesism *literally* transmutes a living being into an object to be severed and consumed.²⁰

THE PERSONAL CHOICE RATIONALIZATION

Intimately connected to foodie culture is one popular justification for eating animal flesh and secretions—namely, the claim that eating meat is a personal choice. A common response to the suggestion that non-sadistic foodies ought to go vegan goes something like this: The matter of eating animals is a matter of personal choice, and matters of personal choice are not moral issues, so the matter of eating animals is not a moral issue. But rather than respecting such choices, vegans try and force their views on others, disrespecting people and their personal choices.

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True, one's diet is a kind of personal choice. In fact, with rare exception (e.g., coercion), every action that we perform is in a sense a personal choice. However, a crucial conceptual and ethical distinction exists between two different senses of the term. One type of personal choice—*benign personal choice*—involves matters of taste that have little to no effect on others (e.g., whether I prefer to wear blue or brown socks today). A second type of personal choice—*pernicious personal choice*—involves actions (like consumer behavior) that may appear from our own perspectives to be benign, but which actually have grave moral implications, effects that sometimes may be invisible to us. Some choices we make are immoral. Some choices have victims. The choice to consume animal products may appear to be benign, but in fact, is a choice that involves a sentient victim. Thus, despite appearances, the choice to eat animals is not a case of benign personal choice, but rather a case of pernicious personal choice. Seeing animal food choices as instances of pernicious personal choice is a necessary step in assimilating nonhuman animals into our moral community.²¹ The billions of animals kept in bondage and slaughtered each year would surely welcome the opportunity to exercise their personal choice, and if granted the choice, would prefer to live out their lives without human-inflicted exploitation and violence. Animals are forced onto the killing floor against their will. Any notion of choice has been taken away from them. Unless we are hedonistic solipsistic narcissists, the personal choice defense holds no sway. The inclusion of a victim removes any possibility of moral justification.

Further, animal agribusiness is the leading single cause of water pollution, air pollution, and climate disruption²² such that, collectively, the consumption of animal products does impose and externalize the costs and consequences of such “personal choices” on others.²³ As if that weren't enough, animal exploitation and consumption remains the driving force behind viral outbreaks such as H1N1 (avian flu), H5N1 (swine flu), and the SAR-CoV-2 COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ Clearly, to argue that eating animal products is merely a personal choice is to ignore and overlook important ethical consequences of such choices.

Of course, there is nothing inherent in foodieism that excludes plant-based fare, nor even ethical veganism. There are numerous vegan foodies who can attest to that. Once we remove animal suffering and exploitation from the foodie palate, the sadistic aspects of foodieism—at least as they affect nonhuman animals—dissolve. This benevolent foodieism may not suffer the troubling moral consequences that sadistic foodieism faces, but it must still contend with the exclusivity and elitism inherent in foodieism, a topic I will leave for another day. For now, it's sufficient to identify, as I have attempted to do here, those aspects of human psychology and behavior that drive us to divorce the gastronomic from the ethical, to willfully ignore that food choices *are* moral choices.

Robert C. Jones earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Stanford University. He is currently an associate professor of philosophy at California State University, Dominguez Hills. His research focuses on critical animal studies and animal liberation theory and activism through a variety of projects spanning traditional and novel areas of ethics, social justice, and food ethics. Dr. Jones co-authored *Chimpanzee Rights*, has published numerous articles and book chapters on animal ethics, and has given talks on animal liberation, speciesism, and human supremacy.

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Chapter 17: Honor Killing: Spiritual Bypass and False Faith in Do-It-Yourself Slaughter

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