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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

It Died for Us

By [FRANK BRUNI](#)

DO oysters have little bivalve souls? Do they dream briny dreams, scream briny screams? On a level that I suppose is selfish and somewhat silly, I hope not, because they are alive when they are shucked right in front of us, their deaths more proximal than those of so many creatures we eat.

They don't thrash like the lobster in its scalding pot, but should we nonetheless worry about how they meet their end? And whether that end is a sufficiently compassionate one?

These questions seem less ridiculous than they once did. This month Whole Foods announced that it would no longer sell live lobsters, saying that keeping them in cramped tanks for long periods doesn't demonstrate a proper concern for animal welfare. The Chicago City Council recently outlawed the sale of foie gras to protest the force-feeding of the ducks and geese that yield it. California passed a similar law, which doesn't take effect until 2012, and other states and cities are considering such measures.

All of these developments dovetail with a heightened awareness in these food-obsessed times of what we eat: where it came from, what it was fed, how it was penned, how it perished. If the success of best sellers like "Fast Food Nation" and "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and stores like Whole Foods is any indication, more Americans are spending more time mulling the nutritional, environmental and, yes, ethical implications of their diets.

They prefer that their beef carry the tag "grass fed," which evokes a verdant pasture rather than a squalid feed lot, and that their poultry knew the glories of a "free range," a less sturdy assurance than many people believe.

But these concerns are riddled with intellectual inconsistencies and prompt infinite questions. Are the calls for fundamental changes in the mass production of food simply elitist, the privilege of people wealthy enough to pay more at the checkout counter? Does fretting about ducks give people a pass on chickens? Does considering the lobster allow seafood lovers to disregard the tuna?

"Foie gras and lobster are not at the heart of the real tough issues of animal welfare, which are feed lots and pigs and cattle and chickens and how billions of animals are treated," said [Michael Pollan](#), author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," which traces the messy back stories of our meals. "On the other hand, the fact that we're having this conversation at all — that we're talking about ethics in relation to what we're eating every day — strikes me as a very healthy thing," he said last week.

Mr. Pollan is a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, and the reaction to a 2002 article of his illustrates how random people's concerns over animal welfare can be. The article depicted the life on a Kansas feed lot of a young steer that Mr. Pollan had purchased, a steer slated for slaughter several

months later.

After the article appeared, Mr. Pollan received appeals from readers willing to pay large sums of money to buy and save the steer. One reader, he recalled, was a Hollywood producer who wanted to let the animal graze on his lawn in Beverly Hills, Calif.

"He kept coming after me," Mr. Pollan said, describing a crusade that culminated in an offer of a meal at a famous emporium of porterhouses in Brooklyn. "He finally said, 'I'm coming to New York, we're going to have dinner at Peter Luger to discuss this.' I'm like, 'Excuse me, we're going to have a steak dinner to discuss the rescue of this steer?' How disconnected can we be?"

The dinner never happened. The steer was killed. Mr. Pollan didn't eat its flesh, but he does eat beef, trying to make sure it's not from feed lots. He said he won't eat veal, but has not sworn off foie gras. For different omnivores there are different codes.

And there is often as much sentiment as sense. The anecdote about the producer suggests the ways in which many people make distinctions and decisions based primarily on the degree to which they have become familiar with the creatures they ingest, the degree to which they have anthropomorphized them.

"People look at the lobster and try to imagine what its experience would be like, but they don't look at a package of chicken breasts and imagine what the experience would be like," said Jay Weinstein, a Manhattan caterer whose book "The Ethical Gourmet" was published this month. "It's because they're closer to the final step of the killing."

While the lives of "free-range" chickens are hardly ideal, the lives of other chickens are even worse, Mr. Weinstein said. The birds' feet are lacerated by the wire they are forced to stand on, while their beaks are clipped so they can't peck at each other in the tight quarters they occupy. He questioned whether any of that was less offensive than the force feeding of ducks.

Foie gras and lobster may be drawing special attention because they're luxury foods whose consumption, like the wearing of a mink, cannot be defended on the grounds of necessity. But even that attention entails contradictions.

Eric Ripert, the chef and a co-owner of the seafood restaurant Le Bernardin in Manhattan, said he made a point of killing lobsters not by throwing them into boiling water — where, he said, "it looks like they're suffering" — but by slicing their heads with a sharp blade.

"I feel good about doing that," he said in a telephone interview.

But where do the restaurant's lobsters await their appointment with the knife? For as many as 24 hours, as many as 40 lobsters inhabit a container that's just 3-feet long by 1-foot wide, he said. It doesn't sound much comfier than a Whole Foods holding tank.

"I should be more compassionate, I guess," Mr. Ripert said.

But, he added: "When you think about treating animals in a humane way, it's unlimited. If you start with the lobster, then next month you should think about the clam, and then you have to think about the fish,

which is suffocating outside the water after we catch it."

Even before it suffocates, a hooked or netted fish flails in a doomed effort to avoid its fate. The process is traumatic enough that David Pasternack, a fisherman and co-owner of the Manhattan seafood restaurant Esca, noted that "you can see the struggle in the flesh of a fish."

If the fish hasn't gone down quickly, he said, "The meat feels and looks stressed out." Does that struggle deserve as much heed as the grisly realities of the abattoir?

Maybe not. Ample scientific evidence suggests that various creatures have varying levels of consciousness. "There really is a difference between the sentience of an oyster and the sentience of a lobster and the sentience of a cat," Mr. Pollan said. "These lines really can be drawn."

And advocates of animal welfare argue that some lines are better than none, that inconsistencies are better than inaction.

But there are human considerations as well. Even in a country as rich as ours, some people can't afford chickens reared according to exacting standards. Other people's livelihoods depend on the status quo.

In a memoir published last year, "The Summer of Ordinary Ways," the Minnesota writer Nicole Lea Helget described her childhood on a family farm. She said she was surprised when much of the reaction to her book focused on the way animals were treated instead of her family's travails.

An anecdote about her father's killing a recalcitrant cow with a pitchfork was meant to illustrate his frustrations, she said. The Publishers Weekly review of the book frames that story as "a staggering example of her father's brutality" and refers to him as merciless.

"I thought it really reflected what can happen to a person," Ms. Helget said in an interview. "I wasn't really thinking about what was happening to the cow."

She expressed confusion about the concern for animals serving a purpose as essential as food. "I just spent a little time in New York," she said. "What seems abnormal to me is having a Great Dane in a one-bedroom apartment. I guess it's all a matter of perspective."

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