

Does this dish offend you?



We've spent years distancing ourselves from our food. But if you can't look at the animal your meat came from, should you be eating it?

LAURA PRICE meets the chefs putting this question on the table

ON THE TABLE in front of me sits the feathered head of a mallard. Its skull has been surgically removed and replaced with a lightly fried brain, while inside its beak is a tartare made from the heart and cured in beeswax. As I pick up the tongue bone that has been fashioned into a spoon, I can't help picturing a simple plate of sliced crispy duck – the sort where I wouldn't have to look the bird in its eyes as I eat it.

But this is Noma, the reincarnation of the Copenhagen smash-hit that hit number one on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list no fewer than four times for its fearless disruption of the culinary scene. You won't find a juicy steak or chicken breast here, but you'll be schooled in reindeer brains and duck hearts, and you may even walk through a greenhouse full of slaughtered game en route to your table. It might sound

a bit *I'm a Celebrity*, but it's not all for shock value: just as he wants us to forage for foods that grow around us instead of importing, chef-patron René Redzepi wants us to acknowledge the origins of the meat we eat.

"We need to be reminded that it's actually a life," says Redzepi, who only serves the mallard dish during game season from October to December. "People say 'you can't present a dead animal, you're evil,' but they eat meat. They're the biggest hypocrites." And he has a point. For many years, we have distanced ourselves from the animals behind the meat on our plates. It's partly why we call cow meat 'beef' and pig meat 'pork' or 'bacon.' Redzepi even believes every meat eater should be prepared to kill an animal themselves.

But would you still fancy that lovely roast chicken if you had to kill the bird

BRAINS, NOT BRAUN: At Noma, lightly fried duck brain is served inside the mallard's feathered head





FIGURE OF EIGHT: Nieves Barragán Mohacho serves boiled octopus at her restaurant Sabor

with your own hands? I'm the first to admit I'm a hypocrite when it comes to meat, but perhaps it is not entirely my fault. Selene Nelson, author of *Yes Ve-gan!* and the journalist behind *that* public spat with food editor William Sitwell, says misleading terms such as 'high-welfare' and 'free range' are partly to blame for our blissful ignorance. "We've been conditioned not to question the things we do to animals in the name of food, and yet also be against animal cruelty," says Nelson. "It's a bit of a paradox, and that's quite uncomfortable to face up to." She agrees that if people had to acknowledge the animal that came before their meat, many more would turn vegan.

It also has to do with culture: while Redzepi grew up in a Macedonian village watching his aunt chop the heads off chickens and pluck them before his very eyes, my own childhood in Yorkshire involved wafer-thin ham from a plastic packet, tinned beans and sausages and actual Findus Crispy Pancakes. The closest I got to butchering my own meat was Sunday lunch at the Toby Carvery.

With veganism more popular than ever, many of us who still eat animal products are choosing to do so more consciously - by using all parts of the animal, choosing sustainable and organic meats and reserving consumption for special occasions. The presentation of meat

in its original animal form is perhaps just a further step towards sorting the hypocrites from the true carnivores.

With a global reputation and almost a million Instagram followers, Redzepi may be the most high-profile chef to have served an animal's face at the table in recent years, but he's certainly not the first. The Spanish have been eating whole Segovian suckling pig since the invasion of the Roman Empire. Elsewhere, a report by psychologist Charles Spence and a passage from chef Heston Blumenthal's book *Historic Heston*

Presenting meat in its original animal form is a way to sort the hypocrites from the true carnivores

both make reference to a rather unsettling tradition from medieval Europe, where a banquet would sometimes come back to life with a trick involving a live-plucked chicken that would wake up surrounded by its roasted companions - possibly something to avoid thinking about while you're eating your Christmas dinner.

St John, the original nose-to-tail restaurant in Clerkenwell, lets diners chow down on a braised half pig's head complete with golden cheek, ear and snout. At Sabor in Mayfair, chef-patron Nieves Barragán Mohacho serves crispy pig's ears, whole suckling pigs, and boiled octopus in all its eight-limbed glory. Barragán Mohaco, who grew up eating whole fish and pig in the Basque Country, says that by only serving certain cuts, not only do we lose the roots of our food traditions, but we also discard the best part of the animal. "I have chefs at my restaurant who see the whole fish and say 'What is this?' They don't even know what a John Dory looks like," she says. "I would never order filleted fish because you need to see what the animal looks like - the head and eyes tell you how fresh it is. There's also a lot of gelatine and flavour in the animal when it's whole. Many chefs and restaurants are losing the principle of the animal when they buy it filleted."

In this age of increasing awareness about food waste and climate change, it

makes sense that we should eat the entire beast, from head to tail. Yet when Sabor posted a picture of a whole octopus on its Instagram feed, one person commented: "I don't need to see the dead octopus. Unfollowed". When Redzepi posted a picture of a feathered duck wing on a plate, the comments ranged from "stunning" to "unsanitary," with the vomit-face emoji thrown in for good measure. (Redzepi's dishes aren't unsanitary - in the case of the mallard's head, it is boiled and then sealed with beeswax for hygiene.)

When *The World's 50 Best Restaurants* posted a photo that Lyle's chef James Lowe had taken of chickens hung in a market in Lima, Peru, it became one of the organisation's most engaged posts. Comments ranged from "horrifying" to "inspiring," and the snap was marked as sensitive content by the platform. One user pointed out the paradox that Instagram had labelled the hen as sensitive, yet allowed plenty of pictures of chicken nuggets. For a photo to be marked as sensitive on the Facebook-owned platform, a user must report it - the company does not actively monitor content. In this case, it falls into the bracket of 'imagery featuring animals that shows visible innards'.

Lowe shared the picture not because he thought it was gory, but because he was fascinated by the way the market displayed its hens with their livers and undeveloped eggs on show. The better the quality liver and eggs, the higher price the hen will fetch, and most buyers will use every part of the bird, with the yolks incorporated into traditional Peruvian broth. It's a similar concept to that used in Japanese fish markets, where monkfish are displayed



Sabor/Julia Verdine/Illy/Per-Anders Jørgensen

with their stomachs split and those with better livers are sold at a higher price.

"People don't want to see the insides of animals," says Lowe. "They're just unaware of the sins of what they eat. They think it's much worse to eat a liver or see the inside of a chicken with some unformed embryos than eat from a fast-food chain, where the animal had just four weeks of life in the most horrific, ammonia-filled farms. That's far, far worse." Indeed, the mallard I ate at Noma had lived its life in the Danish wild, whereas the birds used in your average London chicken shop will have barely seen the light of day in the weeks between being born and being slaughtered.

According to psychologist Spence, our aversion to graphic-looking meat could be likened to the 'uncanny valley' theory, which suggests that humans are generally accepting of robots, until they start to resemble us too closely, whereupon they tend to provoke a reaction of acute disgust. He also says that dishes that move or are still alive on the plate - for example, moving squid tentacles in Korean restaurants or ants at the original Noma - often spark a fear of asphyxiation. It appears the closer our food looks to its original form, the more freaked out we become.

Social media may have heightened our awareness, but it is generating conversation, and that's no bad thing. Chef Thomas Frebel, who runs Inua in Tokyo, came under fire from his Instagram followers when he posted a picture of a bear's paws. He had accepted the offering as a gift from a supplier out of respect for an 800-year-old Japanese tradition that allows occasional bear hunting under highly regulated conditions. Frebel agreed to try the meat as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but would never serve it in his restaurant. In fact, he only serves game at Inua, and is a vegetarian outside of work.

"People have problems being confronted with death and blood, and they don't want to admit that we are responsible for that death," says Frebel, who was previously head of research and development at Noma. "If we slowly introduce the fact that there is death behind every steak or slice of salami we eat, maybe people will go back to eating meat once a week. That's how I grew up."

Chefs like Frebel, Redzepi and Lowe may be happy to post pictures of the more honest side of meat-eating, but they are actually proponents of eating much less of



FULL FRONTAL: [top] Chefs René Redzepi and James Lowe; [bottom left] the bear paws that caused such controversy on Instagram, posted by Thomas Frebel

it. Their restaurants serve game, which is hormone-free and can often have a positive effect on the environment. And as we cut down on meat, Frebel says the biggest challenge for chefs is to get people excited about vegetables. He and Redzepi are increasingly using fermentation techniques to enhance umami flavour to thrill diners in a way only meat could previously do.

We don't all have to go vegan to preserve the planet - in fact many believe that is not the answer. But for me, the duck dish was a wake-up call. Can we continue to turn a blind eye to cruelty and planet-damaging practices or do we simply need to be conscious about what we're eating? If not - and if we can't look an animal in its eye and face up to its death - then perhaps we shouldn't be eating meat at all. 🍌