



fast

Nose-to-Tail Cooking: It's All Good

By Michael Persson / Photography by Michael Harlan Turkell

AS A CHILD GROWING UP IN SWEDEN, I LOVED EATING a simple stew my grandmother made with potatoes, carrots, onions, black peppercorns, bay leaves and horse meat. At the time, I thought nothing of it, nothing of how repulsive it was to industrialized cultures that saw meat as red or white and horses as something to bet on. Even its name, "Kallops," to me, didn't have the onomatopoeic connection to the sound of thundering hoofs. The dish was straight from our family kitchen, no politics, no sterilized social mores, and bared no further examination other than contemplating the buttery meat and thick sauce I would wipe up with an end of bread.

My grandfather was a butcher, someone who knew that to kill an animal for its meat meant using as much of it as possible. This respect came from thinking about animals as more than a rack of ribs, or what lay beside your eggs in the morning. As if

he had a prescient grasp of our concern, today, with food, my grandfather told me that people would feel differently about the animals they'd eat if they had to kill and butcher them. Industrialization hasn't just taken people from the country and put them in cities. It has broken their tie to the land and agriculture, and the sensuality of food.

Chris Cosentino represents the next generation of food artisans who aren't just tethered to the stove, they are reconnecting with the land. Cosentino is a chef who has gone in search of innovative taste and locally produced ingredients with an emphasis on sustainability and minimal environmental impact. This Portsmouth native is the executive chef of Incanto, a neighborhood restaurant in San Francisco's Noe Valley that specializes in rustic Italian food cooked and conjured in a Californian kitchen.

Through the course of his gastronomic education, Cosentino has helped champion the ethic of "whole animal" eating. He believes that the humanity shown to animals in their rearing, and through the process of slaughter, plays a major role in the entire dining experience. To Chris Cosentino, to truly enjoy food is to respect it. His new television show, "Chefs vs. City," is currently on the Food Network.

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MP: When did you become smitten with cooking the parts of animals most think inedible?

CC: I can't pinpoint the exact moment when the seed was planted, but the notion must've occurred to me before I even recognized it as a young child. My great-grandmother, Rosalie Cosentino, was from Naples and she made "soffrite," a tripe dish with chilies, tomato and a bunch of bits. It was delicious, but I'd run from the smell. Now, of course, I love it. As I got older and went to work in different restaurants, I couldn't believe how much food goes to waste. A lot of this is thanks to the current preference for certain cuts of meat. Traditional foods, especially peasant dishes, were based on a broader variety of cuts, and those cuts in turn inspired techniques like braising and curing. While a lot of cooks today shy away

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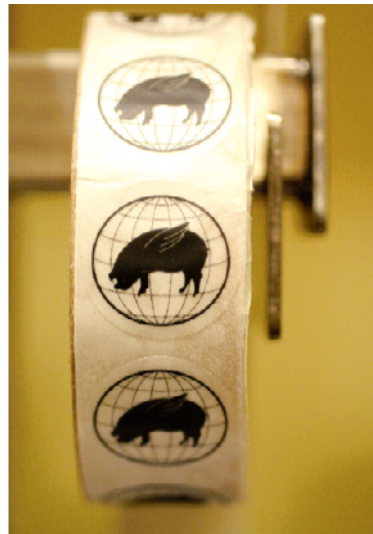
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from offal and other "odd" bits, I turn to them for inspiration.

MP: What is nose-to-tail eating? CC: Nose-to-tail is about appreciating the whole animal. To me, that means acknowledging that the animal has given its life for food, and eating every last bit of it out of respect for its sacrifice. The best part about nose-to-tail is that every piece of the animal can taste great when it's handled and cooked properly.

MP: Is there a reason for its recent popularity? CC: I think nose-to-tail eating has become more popular as people become increasingly conscious of what they eat. Everyone's talking about sustainability, and this is a truly sustainable approach to food. Learning to use the whole animal puts more on the plate and less in the garbage can.

MP: In the U. S., does the consumption of

offal, pig's head, tail and trotters, cockscomb (the frond on a chicken's head and a dish served at Incanto), to name but a few, indicate our growing sense of sophistication? Or has it to do with something else? CC: I think it signals a return to the basics: satisfying flavors and recipes from older times. While every other country in the world eats like this, we in the U.S. have become disconnected from our food sources (growers, ranchers, etc.). Today we are reconnecting, and reaching back to the recipes created when people used every part of the animal out of necessity.

MP: Why use the whole animal? CC: This isn't a new technique; it's as old as time. Using the whole animal is about getting back to the correct way of doing things.

MP: What are the advantages of this kind of

eating? CC: There are many. Health-wise, a lot of offals have large quantities of essential vitamins and minerals. Culinary, nose-to-tail cuisine offers a huge range of flavors and textures; it's like giving a painter a whole new slew of colors. When the underlying flavors come through, this benefits the chef as well as the diner.

MP: What is your favorite part of the animal and with it, what dish do you most enjoy cooking? CC: Choosing just one part would be like picking a favorite child; each cut has a special uniqueness that makes it great in its own way. But I can tell you what my last meal would be: Proper blood sausage, two duck eggs sunny side up, Hitachino white ale and a dozen Quilcene oysters with grilled bread.

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Nose-to-Tail Cooking

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MP: Do you incorporate the "whole animal" philosophy into holiday dishes you prepare at home? **CC:** For the past few years I have cooked a whole pig for my family and friends.

MP: Could you suggest a few dishes from your offal repertoire that could really help transform traditional holiday fare? **CC:** I like venison around the holidays as well as foie gras, so a venison tartare with foie gras is a luxurious way to start a special holiday meal. A great breakfast on New Year's Day is blood sausage and eggs with oysters and a glass of prosecco or two. It will make your hangover disappear.

MP: In the Boccalone selection of meats (Cosentino's and the owner of Incanto, Mark Pastore's artisanal meats company) you make an Easton's breakfast sausage - a nod, I presume, to your family's former business: the Easton's Sausage Company in Newport? **CC:** This is the original recipe from Easton's Sausage Company. The Easton's Newport Breakfast sausage was a classic and we discovered the family recipe stored in a bank box when my grandparents passed away. When I was a kid, I always said I was going to bring it back. I'm proud to have kept that promise to my grandparents.

MP: How much did your family life shape the kind of chef you are today? **CC:** Family life shaped me a lot. My heritage is Italian and English, and both cultures weigh heavily on my cooking. When it comes to the holidays, in particular, both sides would have very elaborate pre-Christmas parties.

MP: Would you say that there are any New England influences in your cuisine? **CC:** Growing up in New England has had a profound impact on my cuisine. I grew up on the ocean, fishing and clamming with my grandparents. As I got older, I helped lobster on Tallman & Mack Inc. fishing boats. I loved the New England seasons, and that serves as a basis for the seasonal and market-driven cooking I do today.

MP: For people interested in nose-to-tail eating or cooking, what kinds of meats should they first try and what dishes would make an easy entrance into this delectable world? **CC:** Some foods that are already part of everyday



RECIPE

VENISON TARTARE with FOIE GRAS

INGREDIENTS

1 - 1½ lb. lobe of foie gras
 1½ lb. venison shoulder, sinew and tendons removed
 2 tbsp. red onion, finely chopped
 ½ tsp. red wine vinegar
 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
 2 tbsp. chives, finely minced
 ½ tsp. Aleppo chili
 2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
 Smoked salt to taste
 Black pepper to taste
 1 tsp. capers coarsely chopped
 1 loaf of country bread, sliced 1 inch thick
 Special equipment: Meat grinder

PREPARATION

Pre-heat the oven to 375 degrees. Season the foie gras with salt and pepper. Place the foie gras in a small roasting pan or ovenproof sauté pan that is slightly larger than the lobe. Roast for 25 to 30 minutes, until the liver has browned and the flesh is firm to the touch. Reserve the fat and let the lobe cool in the refrigerator until ready for use.

While the foie gras is cooling, put the venison shoulder through the meat grinder on a ¼ inch cutting die. Grind the meat into a cold bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Place in the refrigerator. Once the meat is cold again, start by taking the lobe of foie gras and dicing it into ¼ inch pieces then add to the bowl with the meat. Add all other ingredients and mix gently using a spoon. Taste the mixture and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper then mound onto cold plates to be served. Slather the slices of grilled bread with foie gras fat and grill both sides, serving 2 pieces per person with a few extra for folks who need more. Serves 6.

cuisine are what I'd call "gateway" offals. Giblets are a perfect example - just think of your favorite holiday gravy or a chicken liver pâté. I think heart meat makes for an easy entrance. It is similar to a steak cut, but super lean and it can be grilled or served as an incredible tartare.

MP: When you're back home in Portsmouth, where do you like to eat? **CC:** Flo's Clam Shack for clam rolls is a childhood favorite. I love Awful Awfuls at Newport Creamery. Other hometown favorites are lobster rolls and clam fritters. I also miss Del's Lemonade.

MP: What is your impression of Aquidneck Island's locally grown and raised produce? **CC:** I love Walker's Roadside Stand in Little Compton and used to go there as a kid. Stone Wall Farm stand was a favorite too; it was around the corner from my house and they used an honor system for payment.

MP: Do you think that today's chefs differ from the ones of the past in that they do so much more than just cook? **CC:** What it means to be a chef today is quite different from what it meant when I attended culinary school. I'm amazed to see the changes in how chefs are perceived, today, by society. What used to be considered a low class job is now highly regarded, thanks in great part to James Beard and Julia Child. They brought the idea of cooking for a living to a whole new level. I'm indebted to them both.

MP: Do you see yourself enlightening people to think about food from start to finish so that when their plate arrives, or they pull something out of the oven, there is a greater understanding? **CC:** I think when people get excited about eating, they are encouraged to slow down and really taste their food. I hope that by giving a bit of advice, people make more informed decisions. Some consider me a bit fanatical, but what can I do? I believe in what I believe. Not everyone has to like it, but as long as I get a few people to try something new, I am happy. Food should be something we are happy about, not something wrapped up in fear and misinformation. It is as simple as enjoying a meal. 🍴