

FEATURES

Good Eats

By Guy N. Evans



“Eat first and ask questions later.” Such was the advice my mother gave me when it came to dining in a Chinese restaurant. A proverb oft repeated in my childhood, this parental command was the jovial accompaniment to many a strange, interesting, and anonymous delicacy. (Anonymous, that is, until it was deemed safe to reveal what had just been gustily and greedily consumed.)

Upon marrying my mother, my father joked that he would be happy as long as he didn't have to eat octopus entrails. Well ... that sure left a lot of room for everything else! The day after I was born, my mother was already demanding and eating stewed pig's feet (in the hospital!). Chicken feet and duck feet were not far behind. Fortunately, my dad found a temporary reprieve in moving the family to rural, semi-suburban Central New York.

Central New York is not exactly a hotbed of traditional and diverse Asian cuisine, (“Traditional,” of course, meant cook anything and “diverse” meant eat anything.) Nor is it a recognized center of “parts” or “variety” eating as is Harlem or rural France. Thus began the familial ritual hosted by my grandparents.

“The Chinese will eat anything that swims but a boat, anything that flies but an airplane and anything on four legs save the table.”

Grandparents love to see their children eat. And, for my grandparents (called “Pau-pau” and Gungung”), to “eat” implies eating everything. When I returned to Clinton, New York, my friends would be regaled with tales of squid and jellyfish. Having grown up in a town where presenting a whole fish (not even eating)

was considered risky cuisine, I was very proud of my accomplishments. Indeed, for my grandparents, my eating, and to a lesser extent my sister's was a point of dignity. Chinese banquets became spectator sports. They brought their friends in to observe how unquestioningly we

ate everything that came before us. And, the amounts! I could easily outstrip the adults, (though granted, most were getting older) and my stomach bulged to capacity tight as a drum. But, even I had partial limits. It took me until high school to finally try frog's legs (a sort of unctuous combination of fish and chicken) and it took a while for me to build up the courage to eat a bona fide fish eye (the ones on salted, dried anchovies didn't count). Fish eyes are actually very good. The part you want to eat is the clear gel on the inside (vitreous humor) and the socket. The lens,



when cooked, is a hard white ball and not worth eating. Beef tendons were also somewhat of a problem. I would eat them, but not without a funny tingling feeling near the back of my foot.

For the longest time, though, my greatest personal sense of gustatory achievement came not in the form of some strange sea creature, or fish eye, or floating bit of tendon, but rather from a lowly pigeon. (To be fair, it was technically a squab.)

The night started like any other banquet with my grandparents. We set off for some restaurant out on Rockville Pike, all I remember of it is the enormous red dot on the side which reminded me of the Japanese flag. They had invited the Lius, friends from their time in the foreign service, and some others whose names and faces I have forgotten. As always, as grandchildren, we were swooned over. Like all grandparents and older people will do when in the presence of small children, they remarked on our size, our manners, and our appetites. Our parents, no doubt, were wondering what all the fuss was about and why we didn't always behave like this.

The dishes came out, one by one, like the acts of a play, but each one adding to, not replacing those previous. There were the usual snails, and vegetables, and pork, and duck, and fish (whole, of course), and, if there weren't any swim bladders in the soup, there certainly could have been. Then, almost mystically, came the piece *de resistance*, "The house specialty" announced Gung-gung in the special accented vocabulary he kept reserved for just such occasion. Such delicious emphasis was put on the word "specialty" that you knew what would come next was truly worth announcing. Indeed, I have never had such a treat since. The bird, like all animals small enough to fit on a sufficiently large platter, glistened, golden brown and succulent in its refabricated wholeness. From its head to its toenails, everything had been laid out before us for display. Only, because this was a Chinese banquet, the head and feet and toes were not merely for show

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Previous to this moment, I had long been trained in the defabrication of a bird.

I knew that, unlike mammals, whose spongy bone structure make such a maneuver virtually impossible, you could eat every part of a bird, even sucking the marrow from its bones before eating those as well. When eating a chicken, it became a matter of pride for me that there be nothing, nothing but a few dribbles of juice left on my plate. Everything, every part, could be wonderful. Oh, how I lamented when other people threw away their chicken pieces, not even having consumed all the meat, let alone the wonderful cartilage, tendons, marrow, and bones. From the outset, I was determined to do the squab that was now paraded before me its full justice.

It started out usual enough. We ate breast meat, and leg meat, wings, and yes, some, perhaps most, of the bones as well. In my mind, the squab was the most ethereal and wonderful meat ever divinely invented. But that opinion, no doubt, is somewhat skewed by what happened next. I, as the grand source of the table's entertainment, and thus the honored guest, was presented with ... the head. The whole head. Of course, the head of a squab is no bigger than a trio

of curled fingers. Then again, neither was my mouth. Caught in a state of delusion caused by both gluttony and pride I unknowingly place the entire thing into my willing mouth. With one great and magnificent crunch, I chomped down. I cannot describe the sensation that I felt next. At once, I was wallowing in the sheer wondrousness of the experience. I felt my teeth smash through skull and neck bone, through meat and organ alike. Someone around the table, observing my experience, recounted that squab head was a “brain food.” No kidding! I cracked through the brain cavity at the same time as I popped the eye sockets. The triple texture of broken bone, eye juice, and brain butter melded mellifluously in my mouth. But, at the same time, I was gagging. Tears came streaming to my eyes, a seeming extension of the liquid squirting just below them. Sharp bony splinters jabbed up at the back of my throat, and my soft palette. I wanted desperately to swallow, or even to breathe beyond the shallow snorts of my streaming nose, but could not. Oh, but it was magnificent! The squirting, the crunching, the gagging, it was all part of the experience. Each part of the experience added to the reward, the accomplishment.

At last, I swallowed. The shattered bones, smaller now, continued to poke at my esophagus. But, they were defeated. I had won!

Slowly, I leaned back in my chair, my eyes wide open and tears still drying in their little tiny rivulets on my cheeks. I listened as if in a dream, to the silent cheers of my adoring observers and the imagined but still wondrous fireworks of a relieved and unabashed joy.

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This article was written by Guy Evans when he was a high school student in upstate New York two years ago. He took a year off as a Rotary exchange student in Switzerland last year. Guy is now a first year student at College of William and Mary, taking science courses and Arabic and Mandarin Chinese. In April he was selected by the State Department for Arabic language immersion training at University of Jordan in Amman this summer.

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Guy’s article is humorous, tells an inter-generational story, his initial reaction to Chinese food and later enthusiasm for all sorts of Chinese cuisine, his curiosity and his appreciation of cultural differences.

—Ed.