Life in the fat lane

Hoping to discover just what “too much of a good thing” really means, three gluttonous guys embark on an all-night foie gras marathon

By Brett Martin

The idea was vile—but deliciously intriguing. Find out just how much foie gras one man could eat in a night. It would be easy enough; you can barely trip in this town these days without falling face first into a terrine of fattened duck liver. But could it be done? Should it be done? The answer to the latter was almost assuredly no. Foie gras is about as rich as a mouthful of anything can be: It is 87 percent fat and about 100 calories per tablespoon. Basically, it’s liver butter.

But let some nutritionist worry about that, I thought. When Foie Gras: A Passion landed on my desk recently, my editor and I paged through the sumptuously photographed book with something approaching pornographic glee. Written by Michael Ginor, co-owner of Hudson Valley Foie Gras, the country’s largest duck-liver producer, the newly published book features recipes from many of the world’s best chefs, quite a few of whom reside here in New York. We realized we were holding the map for a foie gras “crawl” of some of the city’s top restaurants.

But we knew we would need a test subject, somebody who was prepared for the obscene level of decadence we were proposing. We needed someone accustomed to fine living: a man who jaunts off to Paris for long weekends, who winters in the French West Indies, whose idea of a simple home-cooked meal is a roasted chicken slathered in truffle butter followed by a gourmet cheese course. We needed, in short, my colleague Adam Sachs. A writer for GQ and a former TONY editor, he would suit our purposes perfectly. Using Foie Gras: A Passion as our guide, my editor and I mapped out a route starting on the Upper East Side and working southward, stopping at seven culinary oases along the way. We stocked up on antacids and set out to make food history.

STOP ONE: Lobster Club, 6:30PM.

We meet our man in the homey confines of the Upper East Side’s Lobster Club. Like an increasing number of restaurants serving the traditionally French luxury item, Lobster Club is not French. But as Ariane Daguin, co-owner of D’Artagnan, the purveyor that supplies the stuff to NYC eaters, will tell you, a restaurant’s ethnicity—and even price point—doesn’t much matter anymore. You can find foie gras not only on the Upper East Side and in midtown, but also
fashioned out of what looks like a Hawaiian grass skirt. It's seductive, but I keep it out of our man's reach, since bulking up on bread could be his downfall. Chef David Burke's foie gras creation consists of honey-glazed chunks served over a sweet-corn custard. It arrives in dainty eggshells, accompanied by a tiny glass pot of raw tuna with crème fraîche and a smoked salmon "lollipop" on the end of a stick. Adam is not fooled by the seeming delicacy of the portions. "Whenever anything is this cutely prepared," he says, pointing at the eggshell, "you know there's serious stuff involved." Indeed, there's a whole meal's worth of flavor packed into that little shell, with the sweet kernels of corn and warm custard setting off the powerful foie gras. It is paired with the first of many sweet wines we will be poured as the night continues.

We all agree the dish is delicious, but Adam and my editor get into an argument about whether such interesting presentations are really preferable to a simple slab of seared liver or a basic terrine. Adam worries that these inventive dishes may be a way to "tame foie gras" and that as ever more restaurants devise ever more creative uses for the food, there may be a backlash against it. He and my editor agree to disagree, but it's the first sign that the strain of good eating may be fraying our happy little group.

STOP THREE: Daniel, 7:45PM.

Daniel Boullod is a very, very good chef, but he is also a very, very bad man. Instead of sending out just one foie gras dish, as we had requested, he besieges us with seven foie gras creations. It is hard to hold a grudge, however, in the face of such dishes. Born and trained in France, Boullod practically has foie gras in his blood, and he was one of the first chefs to use it when it started to be produced in the States in the early '80s. (Previously, chefs had settled for imported tons of processed foie gras or resorted to smuggling in whole fresh livers, often in the bellies of large fish.) Our first course is a selection of cold preparations: a halved silo of quail, grape and foie gras terrine, capped with intense port wine gelée, a rectangle of meaty oxtail, foie gras and artichoke; and another terrine consisting of pure foie gras and fingernail-size slivers of pear and quince that absolutely dissolves upon hitting the tongue. Next come four hot dishes: A foie gras pot-au-feu, which turns out to be a hunk of poached foie gras lounging in a pool of duck consommé and tender root vegetables; three delicate rigatoni stuffed with ground porcini mushrooms, foie gras and mascarpone and topped with white truffle shavings; a slab of sautéed foie gras with quince chutney and a fan of caramelized pineapple; and, for good measure, a heap of warm potatoes and foie gras showered with white truffles. A happy glaze suffuses Adam's eyes (and, to be fair, my editor's and mine) as we duly make each variety disappear. We are now, Adam observes as we all lean back and exhale, at the perfect time of the evening: mildly drunk, well fed and decadent but not nauseous. Smarter men would stop here, but we, it is agreed, are not smarter men.
STOP FOUR: Le Bernardin, 8:30PM.
And so, into midtown, to Eric Ripert's high holy place of seafood. I begin to suspect that there is a conspiracy afoot among the city’s chefs; that they are phoning each other and proceeding downtown, spreading the word: Get these guys and get them good. How else to explain the so-called “bar food” that greets us at Le Bernardin? We are unfairly tempted with tiny curried crab rolls and sandwiches of smoked salmon and crème fraîche. Then comes a salmon and caviar croque monsieur. Finally, we are served the main course: seared chunks of monkfish and julienned artichokes, swimming in a black truffle and foie gras broth. The actual foie gras quotient is small, but the richness is not. I worry aloud that my editor and I have wound up eating as much as Adam, but he protests, “I finished all of my sauce,” he says, laying down his spoon.

Afterward, we accept an invitation to visit Ripert in the kitchen. (At this point, anything that might possibly be considered exercise is welcome.) The chef voices no objection to Adam’s mission. “As long as he survives, it’s all right,” he says. Everybody laughs uneasily.

STOP FIVE: Judson Grill, 9:30PM.
“I thought I was in for some serious eating,” Adam says cockily to chef Bill Telepan when we spot him by the bar at Judson Grill. “But so far it’s been bullshit.” Big mistake. Taking up the challenge, Telepan sends out two massive slabs of his terrine au Sauternes, a classic preparation in which an entire liver is squeezed into a mold and cooked at a low temperature until it reaches a pure, creamy state. It was accompanied by sweet black-eyed peas and a small heap of Sauternes-spiked onion marmalade. It’s a measure of just how far we’ve sunk into Liverland that these garnishes, rich enough on their own, are a welcome relief from the liver itself. We finish both slabs.

STOP SIX: Union Pacific, 10:30PM.
Perhaps it’s the fact that our photographer joins us, slowing up the process and allowing all of the night’s food to settle, or maybe it’s just one more glass of sweet wine or simply that we’ve eaten too much, but things go rapidly downhill at Union Pacific. Certainly it’s not the fault of Rocco DiSpirito’s seared foie gras with green papaya compote, which consists of a hunk of foie gras scored with grill marks like a TV-commercial steak and drizzled with tamarind sauce and pistachio oil. The Asian flavors of tamarind and papaya accent the foie gras in this dish, but we aren’t really in any shape to appreciate it. I develop a terrible case of hiccups while my editor stands in the corner, tracing his name on the suede wall. Adam marches gamely onward, though he admits, “I’m not even sure what tastes good anymore.”

STOP SEVEN: Balthazar, MIDNIGHT.
In the interests of honest reporting, I will not claim to be overly disappointed when we arrive at our next scheduled stop, Gotham Bar and Grill, too late to be served. On any other night, Alfred Portale’s tower of Asian-spiced duck breast and seared foie gras would have me salivating. Tonight, I’m starting to get the spins at the mere mention of duck. To my chagrin, however, I’m not yet off the hook as my editor places a few crisis calls to find us a seventh stop. “Do you have any foie gras?” he yells into a cell phone as we stand on the street. From Balthazar, the answer comes back affirmative. “Tell them we’ll be right there,” Adam says.

And in the further interests of honesty, I have to report that Balthazar is where your faithful reporter decides that he can take no more. Head spinning, stomach churning, I head for the exit of the packed brasserie as Adam orders the chicken liver—and—foie gras mousse (and finishes nearly all of it before giving up, I’m later told) and my editor—the traitor—goes for a steak frites. (Both guys, it should be said, have 30 to 40 pounds on your slight correspondent.)

“We’ve done a bad, bad thing,” I think, as I stand hunched on the street. “We’ve taken one of nature’s most beautiful creations and disrespected it.” I feel karmically soiled, convinced that the quacking ghosts of a thousand force-fed ducks will haunt me the rest of my days. Shivering, I wipe some grease from my bill... um, my mouth, and waddle off into the night.

Liver spots
Get your foie-gras fill at these NYC restaurants

Balthazar
80 Spring St between Broadway and Crosby St (212-1414). Subway: 6 to Spring St. Sun-Thur 7:30am-1:30am; Fri, Sat 7:30am-2:30am.

Daniel
60 E 65th St between Madison and Park Aves (288-0033). Subway: 6 to 88th St-Hunter College. Mon-Sat noon-11pm.

Judson Grill
152 W 52nd St between Sixth and Seventh Aves (582-5252). Subway: B, D, E to Seventh Ave; N, R to 49th St; 1, 9 to 50th St, Mon-Fri noon-11pm, Sat 5-11:30pm.

Le Bernardin
155 W 51st St between Sixth and Seventh Aves (489-1515). Subway: B, D, F, Q to 47-50th Sts-Rockefeller Ctr, N, R to 49th St; 1, 9 to 50th St. Mon-Thur noon-10:30pm, Fri noon-11pm, Sat 5:30-11pm.

Lobster Club
24 E 80th St between Fifth and Madison Aves (249-6500). Subway: 6 to 77th St. 11:30am-10pm.

Park Avenue Café
100 E 63rd St between Park and Lexington Aves (644-1900). Subway: N, R to Lexington Ave; 4, 5, 6 to 59th St. Mon-Thu 11:30am-11pm, Fri 11:30am-midnight, Sat 11am-midnight, Sun 11am-10:30pm.

Union Pacific
111 E 22nd St between Park Ave South and Lexington Ave (995-6500). Subway: 6 to 23rd St. Mon-Thur noon-10:30pm, Fri noon-11pm, Sat 5:30-11pm.