



An Eye for an Eye

By Michael Nagrant

SOME PEOPLE SLEEP AROUND. I EAT AROUND. There's been brain, kidney, intestine, liver, stomach, tendon, fish eyeball, brain, bone marrow, thymus and pig's feet. It's probably not a healthy occupation. Most STDs are treatable. Mad Cow-related maladies are not. According to the Center for Disease Control, "no specific therapy has been shown to stop the progression of these diseases." By progression, they mean death.

Mine is not a suicidal pursuit. It's about respecting the sacrifice of the animal. I know I'm throwing a grenade into the vegetarian community's compost pile, but this is not my intent. I do not walk this earth with a Ted Nugent-like "kill 'em and grill 'em" bloodlust. Instead, because I choose to eat meat, my principle is to honor the life of the animal through nose to tail consumption. Too many chefs have overcooked a piece of meat and thrown it in the trash. No cook or diner should ever squander anything.

It's also an intellectual pursuit of the palate based on the knowledge that openness will lead to the discovery of the sublime. Internal cuts of meat may be called offal, but they're anything but, and truly, I've never met an organ meat I didn't like. In fact if Boudin Noir (blood sausage), liver or sweetbreads (calf thymus) are available, I'll skip the rest of the menu.

It's in this spirit that I find myself at the Maxwell Street Sunday market, which has always been a central meeting place for Chicago's immigrants, including Czechs, Germans, Jews and, lately, Latinos.

The market has a post-apocalyptic "Blade Runner" feel with stands hawking everything including power tools, brassieres and the object of my quest, the "ojo," or eyeball taco. The vendors bow to economic necessity and cater to entrenched cultural norms. As a result, there is no better place in Chicago to sample cheap cuts of meat and Mexican street food that celebrates the whole animal.

As I walk down Canal Street near Taylor, I spot a stand where folks stand two deep slurping Menudo, a traditional Mexican soup derived from beef intestines. It's eighty degrees out, but they drink with fierce dedication. Comfort food knows no bounds.

A few blocks down, a vendor hawks Native American dreamcatchers and "evil eye" protection. (Evil eye or "mal-ojo" is the name for a sickness transmitted by someone who is envious, jealous or covetous.) If this isn't providence, what is? Then again, I'm intrepid and hungry, not stupid or superstitious. I move on.

Some of the food stands have hand-painted wooden shingles bearing friendly names like Tacos Bernardo or Rico's Huaraches, but at the "ojo" taco stand, there are only two neon orange hand-drawn menus offering lengua (tongue), cabeza (literally "head," usually goat or beef cheeks) and ojo.

I have eaten at this stand many times, favoring cabeza tacos. Out of curiosity, I usually ask what kind of eyeball they are serving. Depending on the week it could be cow or goat. This week it's goat. If you have an ocular preference, you better phone ahead, and you better come early too. They usually run out of eyeballs by noon.

As I place my order, I notice one of the cooks, a younger guy wearing a trucker hat cocked over his ear, smirking while I mutter the magic words "ojo." I have never been more of a gringo.

I sit down, pour myself some water and watch the cooks furiously grilling in a hellfire of smoke and heat. A few minutes pass, and a red plastic weave-patterned basket, the kind you score at roadside diners, is placed before me. Instead of an innocuous batch of glistening fries or sauce-slathered ribs, I'm faced with a soft taco stuffed with, cilantro, onion and a round milky golf-ball-sized eye, cornea and all, looking back at me.

I admit I'm a bit squeamish. Kidneys and livers don't stare. There's a certain anonymity in their roasted pink and gray shades. I've eaten a fish eyeball at El Barco restaurant on Ashland, but it was deep-fried, and frankly, I'd eat a tennis shoe if it were deep-fried.

I realize I can walk away, but as I look up, a group of deeply tanned mustachioed men chomping on their own organ tacos eye me. The cooks peer over their shoulders, and the woman who took my order, and the guy cleaning the tables hover closely. The choice is no longer mine. Now I'm playing for pride, representing every clueless Chicago white boy who ever stepped foot in the Maxwell market.

I squeeze some fresh lime over the eye and take a bite. The flavor is smoky and charred. The texture is another story. It's a gelatinous stringy mess. I add some hot sauce, but it does nothing to obscure the snotty texture.

I finally met an organ meat I didn't like. On similar expeditions I have discovered treasures like huitlacoche (corn fungus) quesadillas and deep-fried squash blossoms (flor de calabaza). The odds were against me; I was bound to fail at some point.

No matter. Now I am resolved to test my other motto: "I'll try anything twice."

After all, how do I know the first eyeball taco was prepared well or even the best example of its kind?