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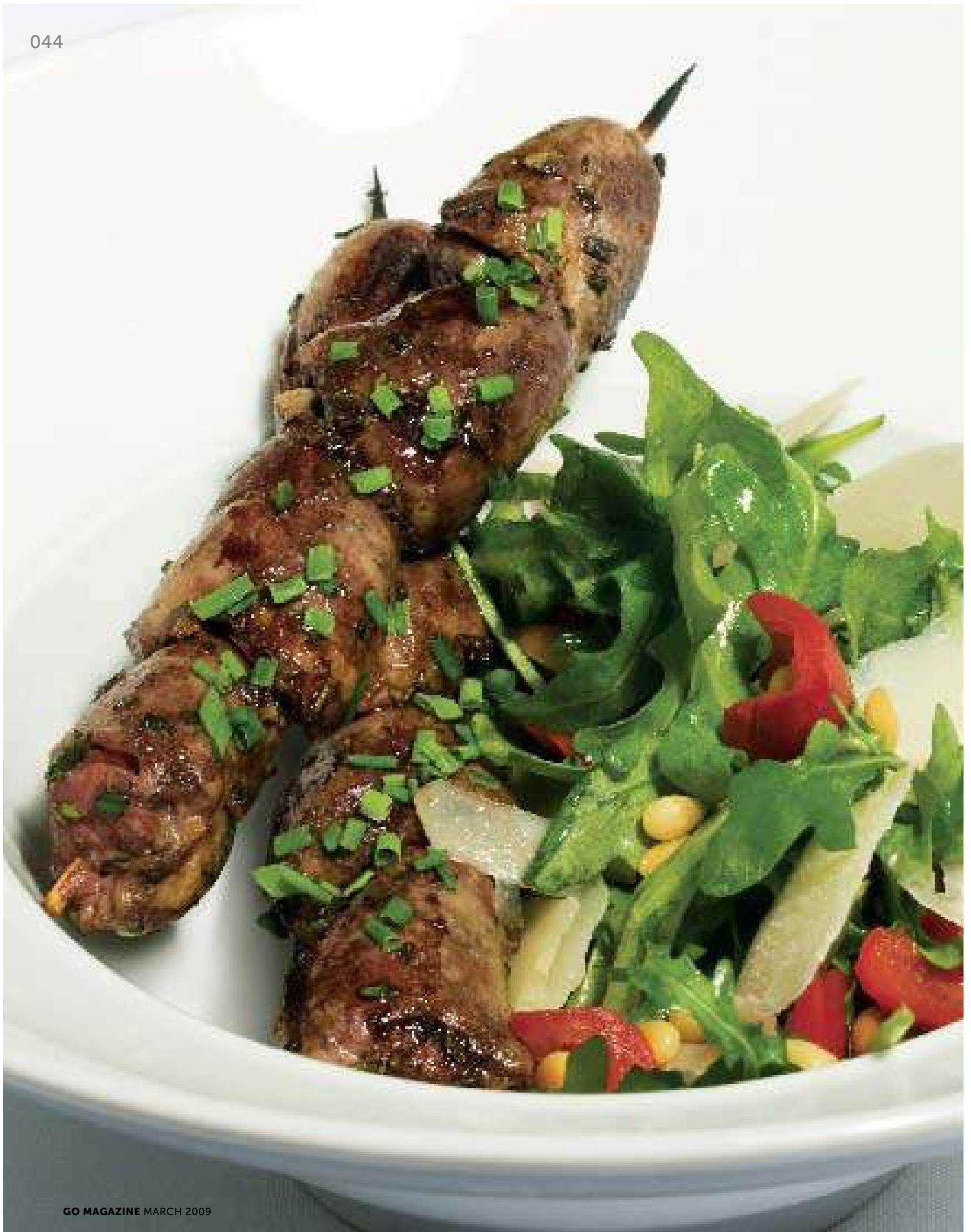
From hard-boiled brawler to family film actor, Dwayne Johnson proves he's actually just a big softy

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MARCH 2009



THE OFFAL TRUTH

Once a staple of peasant cooking, variety meats are becoming the heart of high-end cuisine.

BY AMY ZAVATTO

COOKING IS AN ART FORM—and like some of history's finest masterpieces, some of today's most sought-after dishes incorporate seemingly unusable materials. What old newspapers and tires were to Robert Rauschenberg, jowls, entrails and little piggy tails are to modern-day chefs.

But are these parts really what haute cuisine is made of? As a matter of fact, they are. Gone are the days when the word "sweetbread" incited a wrinkling of the nose, or eating a terrine made from a slow-simmered hog's head was the feat of a culinary daredevil. Chefs across the country are boldly bringing the offal truth to fine-dining enthusiasts—and it appears they're eating it up.

The word offal—or variety meats—actually comes from the simple but direct description "off-fall." After an animal was butchered for all its choice skeletal-meat cuts, this was the stuff that was left over, or literally fell off.

Convivio's Cuore d'Anatra (grilled duck heart skewers with arugula, parmigiano and pine nuts)

“Right now, we’re going through anywhere from 50 to 75 pounds of pigs’ feet a week,” says Chef Chris Cosentino of San Francisco’s **Incanto** (www.incanto.biz; 415-641-4500), regarding his customers’ love of offal. “And *nervetti* [tendon] sells very well for us, too.”

For Cosentino and an army’s worth of other chefs around the country, using the entire animal is partly about respect and a desire to get away from wasteful decadence, and partly about the challenge, since it isn’t easy to turn innards into enticing dishes. One thing it’s not about: shock value. This might make for good episodes of “Fear Factor,” but even during the gross-out moments of “No Reservations,” Chef Anthony Bourdain has an admiration for food and the cultures that have long embraced the tenet of waste not, want not.

“Some of us refer to it as the Fifth Quarter,” says Chef Michael White of **Convivio** (www.convivionyc.com; 212-599-5045) and **Alto** (www.altorestaurant.com; 212-308-1099) in New York. White—whose practical Midwestern upbringing and seven-year cooking stint in Imola, Italy, greatly informs his nose-to-tail view of the culinary world—is fond of taking the food of the people to a higher level, serving slaved-over dishes like crostini of porchetta terrine made from slow-braised pig’s head, *frito misto* of calves brains (“They’re like cream puffs,” he says) and grilled, spiced lamb heart.

“It’s the kind of meat that the Romans were using after the wealthy people took away all the good stuff. They were left with the brains, the sweetbreads, the lungs, the spleen. It’s really the heart of Italian peasant cooking,” he says.

Actually, it’s the heart (and brains and kidney and thymus) of most peasant cooking. From fragrant, steaming bowls of Vietnamese pho, rich with beef tendon, to Southern American chitterlings (despite its cute-sounding name, it refers to pig intestine), the powerful farm-to-table movement has brought a variety of ethnic culinary traditions to the formerly squeamish, who are now clamoring for alternative cuts of cow, pig, lamb and even fish.

Ten or so years ago, you may have found the occasional sweetbreads and seared foie gras on a menu, but today, these items are as ubiquitous as steak, since demand and curiosity have grown like an overstuffed duck liver. Today, it’s dishes like Chef April Bloomfield’s cod milt (you don’t even want to know what this is) at New York’s **The John Dory** (www.thejohndory.com; 212-929-4948) that are winning critical raves.



“I think people have palate fatigue,” White says. “New Yorkers eat out every night. The people who are coming to my restaurant don’t cook at home; they’re foodies, devotees. Or they like to eat out a couple of days a week and cook at their own house the others. So they want to try things that they’re not apt to try on their own.”

But this trend isn’t limited to finicky New York gastronomes: Boston’s **Eastern Standard** (www.easternstandardboston.com)

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

WHAT ARE LIGHTS? DON’T KNOW YOUR TROTTERS FROM YOUR GIBLETS? HERE’S A HANDY GUIDE TO SOME VARIETY-MEAT MONIKERS YOU MAY BE LESS FAMILIAR WITH:

CAUL: The webby, fatty membrane around the stomach. Chefs generally take a cue from its original purpose and use it as a wrap or casing around other foods.

CHITTERLINGS: Also known as chitlins, these are the fatty small intestines of a pig and are very popular in deep Southern cooking.

GIBLETS: Remember mom’s Thanksgiving gravy? It got its great meat flavor from boiled, chopped up giblets—the heart, liver and, sometimes, gizzard of a bird.

HEAD CHEESE: Made from the slow, long braising of a pig’s head. After overnight cooking, the skin slides off and you are left with the various bits of meat and gelatinous residue. These are formed into a mold and usually served cold and sliced (and, no, there’s no actual cheese in it).



(above) Incanto's duck fat-fried rabbit ear with carrot aioli and chervil plouche
(opposite page) Eastern Standard's Frisee aux Lardons (hazelnuts, sweetbreads and poached egg)

com; 617-532-9100) has a daily rotating offal menu, featuring dishes like lamb kidney stroganoff and seared veal liver over sunchoke purée with Vidalia onion rings, giving a whole new dimension to the blue plate special. Sweetbread and swiss chard risotto is served at Indianapolis' **L'Explorateur** (www.dinelex.com; 317-726-6906), while Chef Jennifer Jasinski's decadent seared rabbit loin with rabbit kidney mousse can be savored at Denver's **Rioja** (www.riojadenver.com; 303-820-2282). And at the beloved little **Zazu** (www.zazurestaurant.com; 707-523-4814) in Santa Rosa, CA (55 miles from San Francisco), Chef John Stewart makes a pig heart sandwich with mustard-seed aioli that even managed to convert his formerly-vegetarian chef and wife Duskie Estes to an offal lover.

"You now have new flavors, new textures, new variation with the underlying flavor of that same animal," Cosentino says. "It's like a painter who just went from using five colors to 40." ✂

LAWFUL OFFAL

BEFORE YOU DIG IN, BE AWARE THAT SOME VARIETY MEATS ARE LEGALLY INEDIBLE.

While there is a veritable smorgasbord of offal from which to choose, some parts are deemed unfit for consumption by the Food Safety and Inspection Service, the public health wing of the USDA. The language can be tricky because, as FSIS public affairs representative Roger Sockman says, "Different cultures consume products that are not typically consumed by other cultures."

Pigs' feet, for example, are "generally" not edible, but because many cultures consider trotters to be downright delicious, you can find them for legal purchase in some stores or eateries. As a rule, however, Sockman notes that the following items generally are not considered edible: Hide or hair; hooves/feet; lungs; and spleen.

LIGHTS: For the haggis-loving public, this term means lung. In the US, though, the FDA outlawed serving lung to the public in 1972. However, some still try to slip it onto their menus.

SWEETBREADS: It is commonly thought that these tender

nuggets are exclusively thymus glands in the neck, but the pancreas is another option.

TRIPE: Sponge-like in appearance, this is the stomach lining.

TROTTERS: As the name plainly suggests, feet.

Convivio's slow poached veal tongue and salsa verde

