

Glandstonbury: an offally big adventure

You needed plenty of guts, pluck and brawn to get through Glandstonbury, a 14-course pop-up of nose-to-tail classics from around the world



Mmm, crunchy: pigs' ears at Glandstonbury Photo: Damian Erskine

By Alice Audley

7:00AM BST 15 Oct 2013

Everything about the object I'm holding screams "Don't eat me!". The snakelike skin, the angular knuckles, the jutting cartilage, the intact, very pointy toenail – it all fills me with dread. But I've told my editor that I'm open-minded so, despite my natural reflexes, I pick up the severed chicken foot, unclamp my mouth and have a nibble. "Oh God, no. No, no, no," my mind wails as memories of my childhood –and my sister's flock of beautiful bantams – surface. I pluck the gangly bones from my lips, place them delicately on my plate, turn to my dining companion and say, "Well, that really was pretty offal."

I'm at The Drapers Arms in Islington, north London, for Glandstonbury, a £45-a-head pop-up offering a 14-course tasting menu based around the entrails of various animals. An offal-athon. I've brought a friend with me, whom I met at cookery school in 2007, and we're under strict editorial instructions to try everything. This, I discover, looking at the menu, will include such coyly named dishes as

chitterlings and Bath chaps; while the No Beating About The Bush side of the ledger is well and truly topped up with such delicacies as “Calves’ brains, sauce Grénobloise” and the aforementioned chicken feet.

I look around at my dining neighbours expecting to find, and share in, mutual dismay, but they are contentedly digging in – like a gaggle of Hannibal Lecters – to the various items on their plates.

Who are these people? I’m here, in truth, because I’m desperate. Yes, I’m fairly open-minded and I like trying new things. But really what has enticed me to test out these entrails is the prospect of a byline. The journalist’s trade resembles the sharp end of the meat industry in more ways than one: once my colleagues have chosen what they’d like to cover, it’s left to me to pick up the scraps.

My dining companions however, seem to have no such agenda. The place is packed, jovial shouts are pulsing through the air and trotters are being passed around merrily – I feel like I’m in the midst of a Tudor banquet. The age group is varied, but the majority looks over 40. Perhaps offal is for the more cultured stomach? Agreeable to the more seasoned diner? It was popular, after all, post the Second World War, when, while normal cuts of meat were rationed, there was no restriction on how much offal one could munch. Indeed, as the saying goes: “You can eat all of the pig except the squeal.”

A waiter wearing a wry smile approaches our table with a tray of Venetian sliced liver, onions and sage and a plate of duck heart kebabs and pickled cherries. I take one of each and pass them on to the couple opposite. The woman wrinkles her nose and passes them quickly down the table. She, I find out, is on a fourth date. I’m glad for her sake that this isn’t her first - though I suppose a strong stomach is an important attribute in a partner.

The duck heart kebabs are a welcome respite. Once you’ve broken through their firm exterior, they taste rather like the familiar breast. The sour tang of the cherries works beautifully in unison with the muscle and I find myself with a clean plate. My companion too seems to be enjoying the heart – she’s polished them off and gone back for seconds.

Things take a turn for the worse with the arrival of a tripe, pig’s trotter and ox cassoulet. “It looks like a micropig!” my friend wails, before claspng her mouth. A Mexican wave of alarm shoots down the table, and I have to divvy it up before a resolution not to try it sets in. I eschew the trotter – again trying to repress memories of my pet pigs Bangers and Mash – and scoop a healthy portion onto my plate. It’s thick, stodgy, not overly flavoursome but filling and warming.

Next comes the calves’ brain. My knife slides through smoothly and I take a big mouthful. It’s delicate and creamy, and slips down easily. “Brain,” the man sitting to my left whispers, “is definitely better than brawn.”

I pop to the loo and return as the final course arrives. The amiable table I left is now in fevered debate. “It’s cruel, don’t eat it.” “It’s delicious.” “It’s wrong.” “Do you know what they do to them?” The controversy is caused by truffles, or more precisely chocolate and foie gras truffles. Now I’m home. I love foie gras. And these are exceptional; rich, smooth and utterly delectable. As the verbal duel continues, I snaffle another – and another, and another.

They’re eventually cleared, but it’s too late for the fourth-daters, whose differing stances on the ethics of foie gras seem to have squished any prospect of a fifth. And then it’s over, the offal-athon complete. I’ve tried everything; brains, feet, ears, hearts – and have tried to be as open-minded as possible. As the other diners leave, I realise just how empty the place is, or rather how full it was. A lot of people came to eat this stuff – so clearly there is a market for it. But will innards be the new wonder ingredient in upmarket ready meals? As opposed to the secret ingredient in budget ones? I doubt it. Offal may be a distinguished pleasure, both sophisticated and thrifty, but it’s just not to my taste – nor, surely, to most people’s.

The Drapers Arms, however, is – very much so. It has a wonderful atmosphere, a brilliant layout and great service. But when I return - which I most certainly shall - it’ll be for the regular menu.

No guts, no glory: the offal quiz

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