

THE HEAD OF A COW IS OBVIOUSLY LARGE – but until this moment I had never considered just how enormous its tongue might be. Now I know. The one in my hands is about 30 centimetres long, thick and surprisingly heavy. Taste buds cover its surface, with a crop of much larger, speckled buds on the bulging hump at the back of the tongue, towards its ragged root. The upper surface of the whole tongue is a sad, flannel-grey colour, and the underside is shiny pale pink. As I stare at it, shuddering, its shape and suede-y texture suddenly bring to mind the slipper-clad foot of some creepy, oversized hobbit.

It is day one of my nose-to-tail cooking challenge, and I am already feeling feeble.

My offal tale begins (a side effect of cooking innards, I discover, is an irresistible urge to pun – but I've lost the heart for it now, so won't dwell there for lung) when in a book called *Food & Philosophy* I come across an essay titled "Picky Eating Is a Moral Failing". Its author, Matthew Brown, argues that to be a "picky eater" – he exempts ethical vegetarians and those with allergies or intolerances – is not only to distance oneself from others, especially a host who may offer the food, but to choose a narrow, ignorant path through life. Brown says picky eating is a wilful closing of the mind, denying the possibility that an unpleasant experience might at another time prove bearable or even pleasurable. To cordon off particular foods simply because one doesn't "like" them, he says, promotes the idea that obstacles should be avoided rather than overcome, and prevents a person's growth into an open-minded, generous, fully rounded human being.

As the kind of person who prides herself on unfussy eating, and who freely passes judgment on adults who recoil at a Brussels sprout or confide that they "don't eat peas" as if this were a medical condition, I smugly read bits of Brown's essay aloud over breakfast one morning, safe in the knowledge that I, at least, eat anything.

"You don't eat offal," says my husband, Sean.

Irritatingly, he is right. I love meat, but have never willingly eaten animal organs. I have never cooked offal, nor chosen it from a menu. So how can I claim to be truly omnivorous? And exactly why do I avoid offal?

The American researcher Paul Rozin's work on the "core emotion" of disgust and how it relates to animality might offer an explanation. After decades of research, Rozin concludes that what most disgusts us in Western society are things to do with basic bodily functions – faeces, urine, vomit, snot and so on – and with the breach or violation of the "body envelope". With the deep taboo, that is, of what is inside us. Rozin thinks we are disgusted by these things because they remind us of our own animality – and, closely related, our mortality. My avoidance of liver, kidneys, tongue, brains and so on, the theory goes, can be traced to a quite natural fear of my own death.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE WIGDAHL

Nose-to-tail eating – tongue, heart and all – may be more ethical than sticking to fillet. But does Charlotte Wood have the stomach for a week-long offal challenge?



The whole story

In the flesh: writer Charlotte Wood confronts the raw realities of eating meat.

Well, I decide, it's time to grow up. This aversion is illogical and silly. And, worse, it's wasteful. To say some parts of an animal are good to eat but others taboo runs contrary to all the views I claim to hold about ecologically sustainable approaches to food. Food waste costs money and, more desperately, the planet. And there's the ethical angle: surely eating meat in general is more acceptable if the *whole* creature is used.

So begins my GOOD WEEKEND challenge: to choose one animal and work my way from nose to tail, cooking seven dishes from it over a single week. After a little research I choose the cow, as it seems to offer the most variety of edible organs.

Day 1: ox tongue

Fergus Henderson, the English chef and king of nose-to-tail eating, says an ox tongue should first be brined for seven days, but tongue-loving friends assure me 24 hours is enough. I decide to go with the recipe sent by my most enthusiastic offal oracle, Karen (soon dubbed "the Offacle"): thin slices of cooked tongue, lightly brushed with olive oil, seared and served with a salsa verde.

Of all the meats I will handle and cook this week, the tongue is the only one whose appearance truly repels me before I even undo its wrapping. For a start, its sheer heft is confronting, and then there's the hobbit-slipper factor. But most surprising is how upset I suddenly feel about it, in a way I have never felt about handling any other kind of meat.

Thinking back to Rozin's theory, I understand that the symbolism of the thing is what distresses me. The fact that in humans the tongue is an instrument not only of tasting but of talking, even kissing – and comes from the most physically expressive part of us, our face – makes it so much more personal than a bit of rump or leg. I find myself thinking of the cow who owned this tongue as an individual with a personality. I send a silent apology to the cow – and all vegetarians – as I slit open the wrapping and let the great slug of it slither into a big pot of brine.

After cooking (the brine is rinsed away and the tongue simmered in stock for three hours) comes the most unsettling step of all: the peeling. This must be done when it's cool enough to handle, but still warm. The skin is as thick and dry as parchment. Sean remarks with unfortunate accuracy that the discarded skin resembles the old, ragged inner sole of a sneaker.

After all that, eating the tongue is surprisingly easy. I slice, sear and serve it with dollops of salsa verde. Ali, our only friend brave enough to join us for the offal escapades, is relieved. The one other time she ate it, she says, it felt remarkably like a stranger's unwelcome tongue in her mouth. Not so this time – it's really quite good: richly flavoured, meaty but meltingly soft in the mouth.

Day 2: beef cheek

Today's dish feels like an absolute cheat, but after the tongue I'm not complaining. While beef cheeks are considered offal, a cheek is just a muscle and there is nothing remotely discomfiting about preparing, cooking or eating it. I cut the cheeks into big chunks and make a rich beef curry to serve with rice. Only later do I wonder why, when I found the tongue so distressing, the cheeks – also from the face, after all – present no such problem. Partly it is the familiar look, I decide; once diced, cheek looks rather like chuck steak or any other coarser cut. But also, in line with Rozin's theory, it doesn't breach the body envelope in the same way, and so no primal fear-of-death alarm bells go off.

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An offal task: (above, from top) on day 6, Charlotte Wood trims a beef heart of sinew, tubes and "weird frills and fronds" to make a "nice pocket", then stuffs it with a herb and breadcrumb mix.

Day 3: tripe

When I find a tripe recipe including chorizo, bacon, tomato, paprika, cayenne pepper and red wine, I'm encouraged. How bad could it be? And I think I deserve double nose-to-tail points for the fact the tripe needs hours of simmering in stock made from marrow bones and a cow's foot. I sling them all in, hopeful that any murky flavour will leach into the water, to be tossed before the tripe joins the tasty stuff.

I'm using honeycomb tripe, the lining of the cow's second stomach. Raw tripe is not nearly as repellent on first sight as you might expect, provided you buy it already scrubbed, cleaned, par-boiled and bleached. Faced with its natural colour – a gunmetal grey, I understand – I doubt I could manage it. My pieces of tripe are pretty pouches, each like a soft sea sponge, lovely to touch. Once they join the foot (well, more of an ankle – thankfully, the butcher didn't give me an actual hoof) and the other bones, a grey scum rises, needing frequent skimming. Every now and then, I must push the tripey bonnets – by now I'm thinking of them as a pod of frilly swimming caps – beneath the water surface. As this cooks, the house fills with an odd smell. It's not horrible, but strange. I think of it as a weird emo cousin to chicken stock.

After a few hours the texture of the tripe has changed; it feels much denser. One recipe warns to be careful not to overcook the tripe, as it can melt completely away. You don't say? I can only hope, I think, as I cut the squidgy white bonnets into bite-size pieces and bung them into the aromatic soffritto, tomato, spices, cured pork and stock. I also add a vanilla pod, as my chef brother-in-law tells me it helps to mask the dank flavour of offal.

Once cooked, the braised tripe looks very appetising. The dish also tastes fantastic – except, that is, for the tripe itself. I have eliminated the murky flavour I feared, and if we make sure to include a piece of chorizo with each mouthful, it's perfectly edible. But, sad to say, the texture is still

disagreeably elastic, like a very chewy piece of fat. Asked if they would eat this dish again by choice, Ali and Sean reluctantly answer no.

I'm starting to question whether my aversions are purely psychological after all. If so much scrubbing, brining, peeling, boiling and otherwise disguising of this stuff is necessary to make it merely edible, doesn't that tell you something?

Day 4: beef kidney

I don't wish to be vulgar, but here's the incontrovertible truth about kidneys: they smell like piss. I try hard to fight this idea as I release the single kidney from its wrapping. It is a beautiful deep red, with a glassy shine and a pleasant, jelly-like wobble. Stephanie Alexander instructs me to remove the membrane and core of fat, which is easily done, and cut the kidney into walnut-size pieces. I'm unbothered by the briny smell on my hands until I realise it actually is the smell of urine, and that it's proving stubborn to remove, even after several scrubs with soap and a nailbrush.

Stephanie's calf's kidney recipe involves a marsala cream sauce and spinach. As I fling the kidney pieces into a pan of sizzling butter, my companions, watching over my shoulder, rear back as a strong whiff of ammonia fills the air. Apparently, this smell is exactly what real kidney-lovers most enjoy about the organ. We are not real kidney-lovers, we learn instantly. But once it's cooked, the urine smell is almost entirely gone and the marsala cream balances the strong flavour of both meat and spinach. But I find it impossible to forget the earlier smell on my hands. Sean and Ali eat a lot of kidney. I eat a lot of spinach.

Day 5: calf's liver

I am seriously considering vegetarianism for the first time in my life. People tell me all these meals are greatly nutritious, what with all this protein and iron and other minerals. But I'm craving pure plant matter: pulses, herbs, nuts, leaves.

Regardless, I'm back at the sink, peeling a fine, sheer membrane away from the surface of a calf's liver. The liver is really quite pleasant to touch: a clammy, floppy blunted triangle, deep red and nicely weighty. Cutting into it, however, reveals alarming white-lined valves and tunnels. I'm surprised at how repellent these are, like stretchy portals into some fearsome meaty underworld.

The recipe instructs me to slice it thinly and fry it quickly in a hot pan. It smells good, and I'm optimistic as I set our plates on the table with the accompanying little braised onions and raisins.

My first bite is delicious. "I love this!" I cry.

Then I see the others' faces. One chew ahead of me, they each wear an expression of pure horror. My second chew shows me why.

It seems I have done something very, very wrong. My calf's liver tastes not simply unpleasant – musty, metallic, bitter – but wrong, in a deep, primal way. Did I slice it too thickly? Is it undercooked? Perhaps it's not even a calf's liver – did I stupidly ask for a cow's liver? Is it poisoned?

Whatever I have done, both flavour and texture are utterly revolting. Nobody can eat more than a single bite.

(In the interests of fairness, I try again a few weeks later. The new liver looks just the same and, other than slicing it more thinly, I cook it in exactly the same way. To my enormous relief it is much better – there is a slight resemblance to the flavour of chicken liver, but earthier, more robust. Ali, a liver-lover, declares the earlier fault must have been with the meat rather than the cook.)

Day 6: beef heart

I should have been suspicious of the cheery head-girl voice of the recipe for stuffed beef heart – "a substantial and delicious supper!" – but I manage to tell myself the heart is a muscle, after all. Like other meat. And as it's to cook for more than three hours, surely we'll be tucking into something comfortingly casserole-like by dinner time?

No such luck.

The raw heart is alarmingly heavy and – I don't know why I'm surprised – heart-shaped. Is it the love-heart shape, or the organ's singularity, or both, that provoke this sadness as I unwrap it? As with the tongue, I suppose, the heart somehow symbolises the creature's self more than other parts, and when I hold this heart in my hands I am surprised to feel a sorrowful reverence for it.

But disgust does return, when I begin to "trim away the sinews to make a nice pocket". Of course there are several large, fatty tubes to deal with, some of which make a dreadful slurping sound as I work. There are also assorted weird frills and fronds, greyish pink and blubbery, and tough little threads of sinew deep inside it, to be cut away. A little dark blood seeps now and again from its recesses. But when trimmed, washed in salt water and filled with the herby breadcrumb stuffing, it is much less confronting. And once wrapped in a greaseproof-paper bonnet, tied with a string bow and laid in a golden pool of stock in the roasting tray, it even looks beautiful; a meaty Valentine.

Three hours later, I realise I have vastly overcooked the thing. The stuffing and gravy are excellent but the meat, although still tender, is horribly dry. The flavour is slightly liverish, but it is most reminiscent of hard lumps of badly cooked meat from childhood.

By now I am really quite dispirited. Generally a proficient cook, I have never spent so many hours making such consistently inedible food. For the first time in many years, I remember why some people hate cooking.

It smells good, and I'm optimistic as I set our plates [of liver] on the table with the little braised onions and raisins. My first bite is delicious. Then I see the others' faces.

Day 7: oxtail

Crawling to the end of the week, I'm craving fruit and salad as I dust pieces of oxtail with flour. There doesn't seem to be much meat at all on the chunks of bone, which are like smaller, paler versions of osso buco, but it is so comfortingly un-offal-ish that I don't care. And the result, after three hours of slow simmering in veal stock, red wine and blood-orange juice with olives, is a gorgeously rich, unctuous casserole. At last.

The tail end

It's been a tumultuous week, and I've learnt a few lessons. One is that even if I had fallen madly in love with offal, there are practical barriers to regular consumption. While it may be relatively cheap (everything was less than \$20 a kilo), for the average home cook, most offal is hard to find. The meat for this article came from four metropolitan butchers, took several phone calls to track down, and most needed to be ordered at least a week in advance.

Another obstacle is the time and skill required for preparation. I've seen claims that cooking offal is easy – "no more stressful than cooking a good steak", according to one book blurb. This may be true once you know what you're doing, but my unfamiliarity with these meats – even without the squeamishness factor – made them a serious challenge. And given the many processes often involved – washing, brining, peeling, simmering for hours – it simply can't be classed as "easy" cooking.

The contrivance of the exercise must be noted, though. Sticking with the cow meant some organs were more unsettling than if I had chosen the same one from a different animal – lamb's kidneys, for example, are apparently more delicate, tender and possibly more palatable for a beginner. As well, the

single-week nature of the challenge meant there was no time to recover my composure before facing the next fresh hell of innards.

But I'm glad to have been forced to examine my offal aversions more closely. Certainly the waste built into our society's extreme selectivity about meat now seems more obscene than ever, though I'm not sure what's to be done about it, given the practical barriers to buying and cooking offal.

More surprisingly, though, I now see that there's a huge difference between cooking this stuff and simply eating it. I'm sure I could have enjoyed some of these dishes – as Sean and Ali did – had I not spent half a day wrestling with the raw organ. The memory of the valves and taste-bud-dimpled skins, odd smells and gristly tubes was difficult to shift in time for dinner, proving the tenacity of Rozin's disgust theory. But while I might not rush to cook this stuff again any time soon, I do think next time I see offal on the menu in a good restaurant, I'll be tempted to order it.

I'm calling that a significant breakthrough.

Back at the sink, as I'm wrapping leftover bits of liver and heart for my friend's dog, another thought occurs. It's about pleasure, and its different guises. The pleasure I found this week wasn't in the eating – the sensual, hedonistic enjoyment I used to think was the whole point of cooking. It's cookery's more lasting kind of pleasure – the kind that comes from challenging assumptions, taking risks, trying new skills. It's the satisfaction of a deepened awareness of my own psychology and that of my culture – and I reckon that's worth every shudder and squeal and creepy smell it took to get it. **GW**

Charlotte Wood's new book, *Love & Hunger: Thoughts on the Gift of Food* (Allen & Unwin), is out in May.

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