

Delicacies and Ethnocentrism

This is an open letter to Rick Steves in response to his article “Sightseeing for the Palate,” published in the *Vancouver Sun* (October 27, 2015).

Hello Rick

Your article really made me laugh a few times for its humorous twists, like:

This delicacy is something you won't forget (no matter how hard you try).

...the only polite comment I could muster was, “It's salty.”

I guess these two struck me as the funniest because it was about Dutch delicacies, and I am Dutch. How can anyone say such outrageous things about my delicacies?

There are others as well, like:

Most Scandinavian nations have one inedible fish that is still cherished with a perverse but patriotic sentimentality. It originated during a famine and my theory is that it's now served to remind young Norwegians of their ancestors' suffering.

I like your emphasis on the folksy peasant origin of some of the most popular European foods. I used to think this was true only of Dutch cuisine, but now I have learned that this holds for the delicacies of many nations and cultures. I find the widening of that insight very enlightening and helps me appreciate such foods more, because I have more respect for the traditional peasantry than for their artificial high-class cultured “superiors,” though I guess I must count myself as one of the latter, given my academic degree. After all, my name is “*Boer*”--peasant, farmer. My grandfather was indeed a peasant farmer, having brought up

a family of twelve children on a five-cow “farmlet.”

I have spent many years in Nigeria and learnt to eat many of their “exotic” foods. I have come to love their cow-leg soup, their goat-head soup, their innards soup (*kayan ciki* in the Hausa language). Now I find out that what I thought was unique to the Dutch and, now, Nigeria is also common to other European cultures. I find that very interesting.

But you know, to be honest, your article has an ethnocentric smell to it. You write, “The trick to appreciating such dishes is to think of how it tastes, not what it's made of--just like with caviar or hot dogs.” To be sure, the end caveat of the sentence lightens it a bit, but I think the sentence reeks with a degree of contempt. I think the trick is not to ignore the ingredients so much as to respect the culture along with the history of a particular food as well as to admire how stuff you thought of as inedible can, in fact, be magically turned into a delicacy. That's art, culinary art!

Europe is not some place out there. Europe is here. We are your neighbours. You are telling your neighbours how terrible their food is. As if Canadian are that much better. When we arrived in the 1950s, we were amazed at the rabbit feed that Canadians regarded as a delicacy or the chicken feed. And jam with peanut butter on pulp paraded as bread? Ugghh! I now recognize that our reaction was ethnocentric, pure and simple. I now love most of those “despicables.”

Indeed, local foods are associated with pride and patriotism, but I'm not so sure about your nationalism.

Let me proudly introduce you to that European delicacy known as “*hoofdkaas*” or “head cheese”: the *entire* head of a pig--brain, snout, ears, eyes and all. You may have to go to your butcher for your favourite sausage spices and then, don't forget your three or four browned onions. Boil the dickens out of it all till the bones come clear. Discard the bones or perhaps give the safer ones to your dog. Blender the rest of the now boneless

mixture. Place it in bread pans in the fridge overnight to let it jell. The next morning cut it into packages and wrap them in Glad for the freezer. Good as a snack, for sandwiches, for gravies, for soups. In one word, "delicious." If the ingredients turn you off, think about the Canadian delicacy that comes from that same pork's behind!

***Bon appétit* or, as we prefer to put it, "*Eet smakelijk!*"**

John H. Boer