

Friendship and Cannibalism Preparing to Feast on a Hen

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The hen I am preparing for this feast ran after me as I walked to the slaughtering block. She had pecked grain from my hand since she was a chick, had prodded my leg gently with her beak whenever she wanted her chin tickled, and if I lay down on the ground for a nap, she would nestle at my side.

I can hardly call someone my friend without knowing whether, in her own perceptions and language, she might be willing or able to call me hers. But killing and eating a creature to whom I have felt close and who in her own way has sought to be close to me—albeit under the totalitarian regime of animal husbandry—is rather like killing and eating a friend. So, I shall refer to this hen as my friend, even if it is not quite appropriate. And with that, my consumption of the hen verges on cannibalism.

The cannibal feast, dining attentively on a familiar body, provides scope for intense intimacy. Such intense intimacy that it implies the possibility of being eaten oneself. Perhaps the borderline between eating and being eaten is effaced in this act. If I kill (or contract a killing) and eat with cannibalistic intent, I am essentially willing to be slaughtered and eaten myself. Conceivably (depending on how we contemplate the bonds between ourselves and the substances that surround and compose us), any consumption—be it of animals, fungi, plants, or minerals—might be regarded as an act of cannibalism.

From start to finish, the process of preparing and eating acknowledges the presence of the friend who has been slaughtered until every last piece of her has been ingested and digested and nothing of her is left. This is not a chicken recipe or a chicken dish. This is a friend. For that reason, the preparations must take a few specific factors into account:

We add nothing to our friend, no side dish, no salt, no spices, no oil or butter, only heat and at most some water to facilitate the cooking, as we humans are obliged to cook many ingredients before we can absorb them. (In the course of the meal, however, we may need to soothe our troubled savoury nerves. A counter-texture and counter-taste may be of assistance here—traditionally bread, spuds, rice, or pasta.)

I dismember my friend as little as possible during preparation. The transformation of her body into smaller pieces, pulp, and liquid should not be pre-empted at this stage but left to our mastication and digestion. This rules out such options as turning our friend into soup, for that would homogenise her corporality. At best, once the meal is over, the remaining bones might be decocted into a broth, enabling us to swallow these less accessible components of our associate.

Some dissection will nevertheless be essential. The body and neck are severed from the rump with the hatchet in order to kill as quickly as possible, as we cannot bear the idea that our friend might realise or sense that she is dying. Moreover, here in Germany, suddenness is required by law. Some of her blood will spurt and flow in the process, and this should be caught and kept as far as possible. Her feathers will be plucked, as our teeth and stomachs are ill-designed to cope with them. The rump must be slit at the cloaca so that we can reach in and extract the inner organs—for many of these require particular cleaning and, in some respects, different methods of preparation compared with other members. For the same reason, her feet will be cut off at the ankle joint and dealt with separately. Some of the fat can be removed from the rump for use with other parts that require lipids for effective preparation. Apart from this, our friend's rump will be left intact. Even so, the sight of our friend is by now quite different from the one to which we were accustomed.

Quite possibly, there will be a fully formed egg with a hard shell in the oviduct. If our friend were still alive, she might be about to lay it. Further up the oviduct, there will be a succession of yolks at various stages of development. The bigger of these unlaidd eggs can be carefully extracted and should be eaten tenderly, either raw or else very briefly curdled in hot water or a pan. During removal, we might pop one of these spheres into our mouth, allow it to burst under pressure from the tongue, and note the spread of its fine taste. The rest of the duct with its series of yolks still the size of pinheads remains in the abdominal cavity; the lungs, bronchia, and kidneys are likewise left in place, as they are all too fragile for extraction. In situ, they will form islands with their own particular savoury quality when the rump is prepared.

The oviduct can be steamed or fried in endogenous fat until slightly crusted or entirely crisp. If taken from an older hen, it may have a softer, almost worn appearance, but a hint of crunchiness will make it a choice morsel.

The entire length of the intestine—duodenum, jejunum, caeca, colon, down to the vent, combined with the attached pancreas—is split open from the inside out with a very thin knife tapering to a sharp point, then rinsed under running water. This intestine is tough, and so it should be braised or fried for some time. Depending on duration and the intensity of the heat, this delicacy will be either firm and chewy or crisp and crunchy.

The spleen can be eaten raw or rare. Although it is very small, it is also extremely rich, and so I recommend cutting it carefully in half and sharing it between two people.

I advise preparing the crop and true stomach in a similar manner to the intestine, but the heat need not be applied for so long, as these are much less rubbery.

The stomach is cut open, and its hard inner wall removed. The latter should be diced small and, along with the contents of the stomach, fed to the chickens. They enjoy any slaughter scraps: titbits of flesh, fat and clotted blood, small feathers, fragments of the trachea and gullet, and also the water containing rinsed-off blood.

The heart and stomach are cooked long and slow until our teeth are able to chop them.

If the liver is taken out clumsily, small slivers may break loose. They can be placed warm on the tongue, where their delectable taste blends with the aroma of innards and excrement still redolent with the glow of life. For those not keen to consume the liver raw, it should be fried very lightly in hot endogenous fat, but preferably retaining an almost raw quality so that the palate can relish its savour to the full. (I do not know whether this method of preparing and consuming might possibly be detrimental to the health of the eater. But that is not at issue here.)

The blood collected during decapitation and exsanguination—the portion is always rather meagre—is briefly thickened in the pan but must on no account be allowed to harden, as the taste will be lost.

I have never dared to try the gall bladder and its contents. Nor do we ever feed gall to the chickens, although we give them everything else. Too great is our prejudice and the awe inspired by this mythical organ. In many hens, I find no gall bladder at all.

I place my friend's rump together with her wings and legs in a closed, cast-iron saucepan on a rack over her own fat and steam her, possibly adding a little water. The older my friend, the slower and longer this process will be. It softens her meat, but she will retain her well-defined structure, given that she has spent many years growing, exercising plentifully, and benefitting from a varied diet. The heat can be turned up high at the end to crisp the skin.

A brush is used to free her feet from the dirt that still clings under her claws and between the scales. They are then steamed or braised at length until tender, unfolding their generous, well-rounded taste.

The head and neck are like a chocolate box, full of distinctive specialities and differentiated textures: the tongue, the dewlap, the comb, the eyes, the fine layers around the skull and beak, the brain, the wind-pipe, the oesophagus, the muscles around the cerebral vertebrae, the fatty skin of the neck, the blood that gathered under the blow from the hatchet, the sweet juice from the ossicles. Although I have never attempted it, the head could conceivably, like the innards, be divided into its various components, allowing each to be prepared individually and, on occasion, eaten raw or rare. The less she is cooked, the more it is our friend that we are eating, and the finer and more differentiated will be the nuances with which we taste her every fibre.

Wherever feasible, I recommend spreading the menu over several days when consuming a friend. This allows us to honour every part of her, with clear breaks between the courses, and to enjoy each part for itself. Begin with the soft inner organs, still warm with life, as these must be eaten particularly fresh. The liver, spleen, and blood (and in the case of a cockerel the testicles) will yield a meal for three persons. The intestine, oviduct, or feet can, as they are preserved well by refrigeration, be kept for the last day and, once we have devoured every other part of our friend, served as a finale.

The broth made from decocted bone and gristle will then be the fading reverberation of her memory.