



EXAMINATION OF FOIE GRAS CONSUMPTION HABITS

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ABSTRACT

The goose liver is a special product produced by the force-fattened geese. The manufacturing process has thousands of years of history, which has grown to be a key sector for Hungary.

First, we intended to get to know the producers side on force-feeding of geese in the past and present during our research – this serves as a basis of structured interviews with 10 workers in the administrating sector. On the other side, we investigated the consumers' habits and opinions in relation with goose liver with a questionnaire. The first set of questions was directed specifically to consumer habits, including how often the product is consumed and why it is so. The second set of questions was intended to assess the knowledge on the process and other topic-related issues. Finally, we could establish that this type of products called 'hungaricum' is very important for Hungary because of the export and it also provides the basis for many farmers.

Keywords: structured interview, questionnaire survey, consumers' preferences, animal welfare

1. INTRODUCTION

Production of goose-liver has had an outstanding place in poultry products of Hungary for decades. We are planning to show this field of interest from different aspects in our research.

1. we are aiming at giving a picture of both the past and present of the intensive liver-production,
2. on the basis of the direct opinion of people participating in production we are planning to get an inside view of the production,
3. furthermore, we want to assess the changes in consumers' habits, and we would like to get more information about people's knowledge on force-feeding of geese.

To achieve our aims we completed both quantitative and qualitative researches.

1.1. The story of goose fattening

Of all the poultry spieces what the humans domesticated the earliest was the goose, so goose farming can be regarded as one of the most ancient human traditions. Force feeding was applied even in the ancient Egypt (2500 BC.), there are pictures carved in or painted on gravestones and reliefs from 2500 BC. which show force fed geese.

This practice to fatten geese spread presumably from Egypt towards the Mediterranean region, first it was used in Greece then in the ancient Rome. After that, force feeding geese became well-known among the Jews where it spread all over Europe from.

According to certain researches, there are signs of this tradition which go back about thousand years in the Carpathian-basin. Goose farming has some hundred-year-old tradition in Hungary since geese were kept in the 10-11th centuries, too, after which church tenths had to be paid. The intensive goose farming started to develop in the middle of the 19th century which was due to the growth of corn production. Until the corn had not become a widely known fodder farmers used energy-rich plants to make the goose liver grow big and fatty. One of the most typical fodders was the fig which was the most basic solution. It resulted in a further development that goose farming on detached farmsteads and corn production linked together more and more tightly. As a conclusion it can be said that goose farming of Hungary significantly developed from the second half of the 70s as a result of which our country has been the largest producer and exporter of goose-liver in the world since 1980. [3] [6] [7]



1.2. Challenges in animal welfare of the intensive goose-liver production

Goose-liver production is attacked on the basis of animal welfare issues, mainly it is the process of force feeding itself which is regarded as cruelty to animals. However, there is no scientific evidence even today to support this opinion. In countries which have great traditions of liver production, such as France, Hungary, Bulgaria, this sector employs a high number of workforce. Aggravation of regulations on animal welfare and different animal rights movements pose great challenges to the sector. Several countries in the EU prohibit force feeding, like Germany, Poland, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Luxembourg. In these latter countries only Poland has a specific law to prohibit force feeding, while the others provide a general prohibition of force feeding. [3] [4]

The committee of agriculture and regional development of the European Parliament accepted the report relating to the EU animal welfare strategy for the period between 2012 and 2015 in June, 2012 but it refused the proposition on prohibition of fattened goose-liver.

We, Hungarians, have always considered force-fattened goose liver as our cultural and gastronomic heritage. In our country the Act XXX of 2012 was accepted in April, 2012 which defines the Hungarian national values and „hungaricum” as an indication of a value worthy of distinction which represents the high performance of the Hungarian people thanks to its typically Hungarian attribute, uniqueness, specialty. In the light of what criteria have been listed the goose-liver has a worthy place among other hungaricums. [5]

The organization called „Four Paws” is an animal rights organization, the seat of which is in Wien, that has started an international campaign against meat and liver coming from force-fed geese in November, 2006. It made a black list which included more Hungarian companies. The organization requested the supermarket chains not to buy products from companies which are on their list because they are involved in production of goods using the process of force-feeding. As a result of these measures, a certain situation took shape in 2008, which was also mentioned in the interviews made with the producers. The Hungerit Ltd. in Szentes suspended the manufacture of force-fed goods as they had lost their Austrian and German markets of great significance. The so-called discrediting campaign caused a serious damage –worth of some thousand millions forints- for the company and they had to dismiss hundreds of employees. The Hungerit Ltd. sued the Four Paws for damages but as the first step they wanted to be removed from the list. [8] The emotions became determinant factors, although the question of food quality and food safety should have been emphasised. [2] The responsibility of media is to be highlighted; however, in this present case the sensation-hungry media ignored the reality from time to time.

1.3. Changes in production and export of the force-fattened goose-liver

Tab. 1 shows the changes in production and export of the foie gras between 2006 and 2012, year by year and indicated in tons. As it can be seen in the table the production grew up to 2008 then suddenly it stopped and then a regress can be experienced. Though this regress is not of that great degree as the data in the table suggest – due to the wage cut. As a result of radical animal rights actions the regress lasted up to 2012, however, the produced quantity grew again last year.



Table 1. Production and export of the foie gras 2006-2012 among the members of BTT (ton) [5]

Year	Production (t)	Export (t)
2006	1 734,1	1 243,9
2007	1 947,2	1 318,5
2008	2 006,4	1 457,6
2009	1 556,8	1 173,6
2010	1 331,9	1 242,4
2011	1 190,6	1 205,5
2012	1 353,5	1 126,3

The quantity of goose-liver export shaped up according to what has been said above. The proportion of goose-liver of all geese reached its peak in 2009 with 45,2%, in the subsequent 2 years a regress can be observed, but in 2012 it exceeded the proportion of 40% again. In general, the goose-liver always approximated the value of 10% of all poultry export in the examined 8-year-long interval. Moreover, it exceeded this value in 2009 with the proportion of 12,1%. [5] It is worth to take into consideration that the loss in production or its artificial restriction in countries will be eliminated in short time since in the globalized economy of our era it is an easy logistic task to replace the missing product quantity. [1]

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

During our work we carried out a double research in order to examine the subject from both sides. On one hand, we made structured interviews with 10 farmers whose main scope of activity is goose-fattening and production of goose liver; on the other hand, we intended to get more information on consumers' habits using a questionnaire survey. I accomplished this latter one in different types of settlements involving mostly the region of Southern Great Plains: in cities of county rights, also in towns and villages. The 18-year-old or older parts of the population of the settlements involved had the same chance to get into the survey. The questionnaire had the following groups of questions:

- Examination of the consumption frequency.
- Examination of the factors influencing the consumption. (occasion, price, healthiness)
- Quality and price sensitivity.
- Examination of attitudes towards the product.
- Examination of the knowledge about organizations related to the product.

The completed questionnaires were analyzed with STATISTICA program and EXCEL spreadsheet.

3. RESULTS AND THEIR ASSESSMENT

3.1. The results of the qualitative research

In connection with the interviews made with goose breeders we want to highlight three main problems. One of them is related to the *economic crisis* about which everybody clearly claimed that the expenses were growing and the rate of growth of the revenue is not proportional to the rate of growth of the



expenses. They have to produce a lot more but the income does not grow. There were different opinions about the *increase of severity by the EU*. The proportion of yes-no answers was 40-60%. Those whose opinion was that the aggravation caused problems referred to the growing expenses of the changes prescribed by the EU. According to what they experience, the compliance with the regulations of the EU causes difficulties, moreover, extra expenses. To operate the given farm properly a number of authorizations (water permit, monitoring) are required the collection of which needs extra expenses again. They have to meet the requirements of the aggravation and regulations to keep the farm operable later in time, too. To solve them, they have to develop themselves which requires financial investments. These investments are based on the equity that is what causes the difficulties. Coming to *the current issues* livestock farmers listed the following problems: 6 of them underlined the rise in fodder and medicine prices, while 3 farmers mentioned the low purchase prices. 2 of them considered the higher expectations a problem, like the loss in demand and paying the employees, as well, together with the deterioration of the tamping material. One of them highlighted delaying payment as a current issue.

3.2. The results of the quantitative research

In the survey 150 people filled in the questionnaire, 67% women, 33% men – typically aged 26-40 (42%), 18-25 and 41-65 (27% - 27%)- answered the questions. Regarding their qualifications, 38% had university or college degree, 54% secondary school certificate, and 8% primary school certificate.

The first question of the questionnaire tries to find the answer to the frequency of goose-liver consumption. To determine the consumers' frequency we listed five options. The assessment showed that a significant part of the answerers (39%) consume the product 2 or 3 times a year, 23% only once a year. 19% of the answerers do not consume goose-liver at all because -as they said- they do not like this product. There is a relatively small number of those who have goose-liver every week. They are typically those who produce it or their family or friends fatten geese. The frequency of goose-liver consumption is rather influenced by its high price. Most people referred to their low income and that is why they cannot afford to buy goose-liver, some of them regarded this product beyond their reach.

Our second question is in tight connection with this subject when we asked the question about the occasions of the consumption. As possible options we listed Martin's Day (46%), Christmas (22%), a family occasion (29%), and no special occasion (75%). The category of „Other” (6%) involved those who said that they do not consume goose-liver, at all. The answerers could choose more options.

In the following, the answerers could read 5 statements in the survey. Their task was to indicate on a five-point scale how much they agree with the statements. On the basis of the answers it can be seen what image the consumers have on the goose-liver and products made of it. We calculated average and scatter from the points (Tab. 2).

Table 2. The consumers' opinion about the statements on goose-liver (N=150)

Statement	Average	Scatter
The goose-liver is a Hungarian specialty.	4,36	0,91
The goose-liver is a part of the healthy diet.	3,29	1,21
The goose-liver is unpayable for you.	3,01	1,16
The goose-liver is too fatty for me.	2,59	1,32
It is difficult to make goose-liver for me.	2,42	1,45

The answerers agreed mostly that the goose-liver is a Hungarian speciality, besides, it can be clearly seen that the product has a very high price so it is unpayable for most of them. For those who consume it it is

not difficult to make the product – as the low point of the last statement shows. However, the consumers are not really aware of that the goose-liver is high in calories so it does not belong to the category of light food.

In question 7, which intended to examine how much the consumers know the *method of force feeding* and its steps, we gave four options. The answerers had to choose only one of them. 47% of them is aware of the process of force feeding, and those who know exactly what process goes on in fattening the goose-liver are in an approximately similar number (40%). The proportion of those who do not know and do not want to know this process is 8%. They chose the option that they do not know it but want to know it in the smallest number (5%). (Fig. 1).

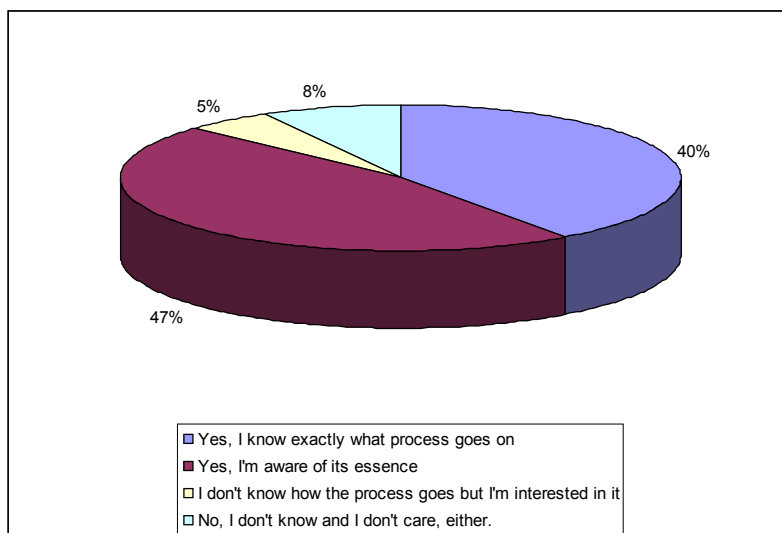


Figure 1. The knowledge of the process of force feeding geese

Distribution of answerers on the basis of how much they know about the process of force feeding geese, % (N=150)

In the following, we intended to examine the opinions on the organization „Four Paws”. 79% of the answerers have heard about them. The rate of the agreeing with the statements on them is shown in Tab. 3.

Table 3. Distribution of answerers on the basis of how the consumers see the activity of the organization called Four Paws (N=121)

	Average	Scatter
The activity of the organization results in decrease of production in the Hungarian goose sector.	4,19	1,19
The „Four Paws” damages the advantageous position of Hungary because it could reach it with the goose-live which is of „hungaricum”-character.	4,17	1,27
The organization is not about animal rights movement.	3,36	1,40
There should be more organizations of this kind, besides the „Four Paws” which protect animals.	2,21	1,43



According to the data, most answerers judge the activity of the organization destructive. The questions above were examined on the basis of demographic criteria, too. The following significant differences can be pointed out:

- In case of country and city dwellers we could find some differences in the question of how much they are aware of the process of force feeding. The number of people who live in the countryside is 33% of the answerers. 55% of them know the process exactly, 35% know the essence of the process, while 6% and 4% of them have the opinion that they do not know the process but are interested in it, and do not know the process and are not interested in it. 53% of the town dwellers are fully aware of the essence of the process but it is not totally clear for them. 32% have an exact knowledge on it, 5% do not know the process but are interested in it. The number of those who do not know how the goose-liver is produced and are not interested in it is 10% (Fig. 2).

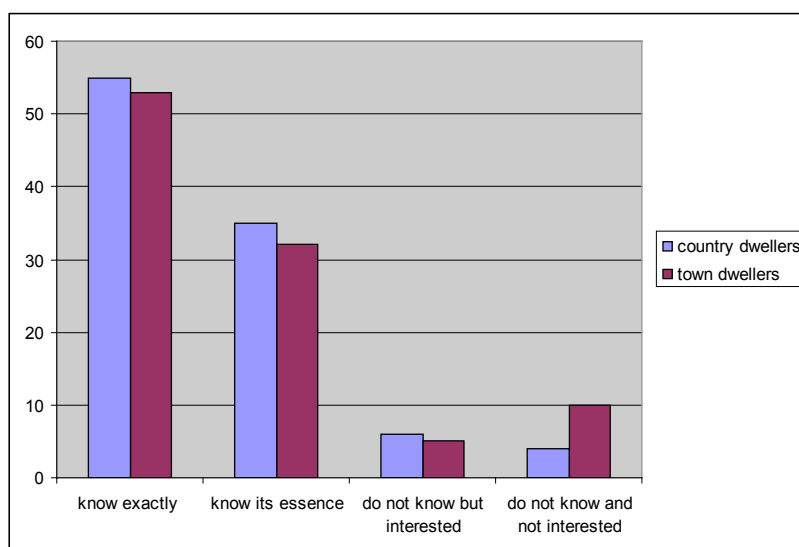


Figure 2. Distribution of answerers on the basis of the knowledge on force fattening among country and city dwellers (N=150)

- Everyone of those who finished their primary education has heard about the „Four Paws”. 80% of those with secondary education and 75% of people with university degree could say that the „Four Paws” is not unknown for them. The reason for this apparent contradiction is that people with lower qualifications breed geese so this subject exercises more influence on them, while those with higher qualifications are not necessarily interested in it.
- Examining the distribution according to their dwelling places, 94% of the inhabitants of the countryside and 72% of the town dwellers said that the organization called „Four Paws” is not unknown for them. We can prove with this question that the town dwellers are less involved in this subject, so their indirect knowledge on it is more superficial, too.

4. CONCLUSIONS, SUGGESTIONS

On the basis of the research results, in case of the goose-liver and products made of it, it can be concluded that consumers' demands, their purchasing power and shopping habits are different according to their geographical position, age group and qualifications. Force feeding of geese is a widely spread process in the region of the Southern Great Plains, a lot of families earn a living from it. After assessing the results it can be said that people associate goose-liver to force feeding geese. Mostly country people associate to the process itself, they indicated in the largest number the answer that they exactly know what process goes on



in force feeding or that they are fully aware of its essence. Town people associate goose-liver rather to its taste. Most of them think of pate, fried goose liver and delicious taste when they hear the word „goose-liver”. According to the consumers’ judgement goose-liver products can be sorted into the category of high prices, that is why their consumer group involve people with higher income. So, goose-liver has become a rarity since people can buy it only for high prices.

The answerers’ opinion about force feeding as a process was generally similar. In most cases it is judged as an unavoidable evil. Nowadays, issues of animal protection and animal welfare are getting more and more emphasized even in our country. A small number of the answerers regards this process as cruelty to animals, it is typical for those who do not know the process itself.

Analysing the question groups related to animal protection it can be concluded that only 21% of the answerers have not heard about this organization at all. Most of them agreed with the statement that the „Four Paws” damages Hungary’s advantageous position which was reached the goose-liver of hungaricum-kind (4,17), and it causes the loss in production of the national goose sector (4,19). After questioning these 150 people, it turned out that 58% of them consume goose-liver or products made of it in different frequency. It can also be seen that those who do not consume goose-liver do so because they cannot afford it. The assessment clearly proves my earlier presumption that consumption of goose-liver is connected with some occasions in Hungary.

Its consumption can be improved by publicizing goose-liver in either gastro-TV shows or in festivals where people can get recipes or can taste it. The goose-feast on Martin’s Day is popular in restaurants but menus could offer different choices on other days, too. Of course, the high price decreases the demand, but potential consumers who do not buy the product because of theoretical reasons (hostility against force feeding) can be persuaded with presentations, leaflets, brochures that this technology is not against geese. It is very important from the point of view of profitability, it can result in development of our national economy. It has a highlighted part in our export, besides, it provides the basis of several family farms and enterprises.

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