

28 February, 2025

HIDDEN

Forbidden Bites: East Asia Edition

Inside the
Black Market
for Illegal
Foods

Banned
Foods:
What's Illegal
& Why?

*Exploring the
Taboos, Bans &
Hidden Delicacies
of East Asia*

*"What happens
when food
crosses the
line?"*

*Would YOU eat
These? Test
Your Culinary
Limits!*

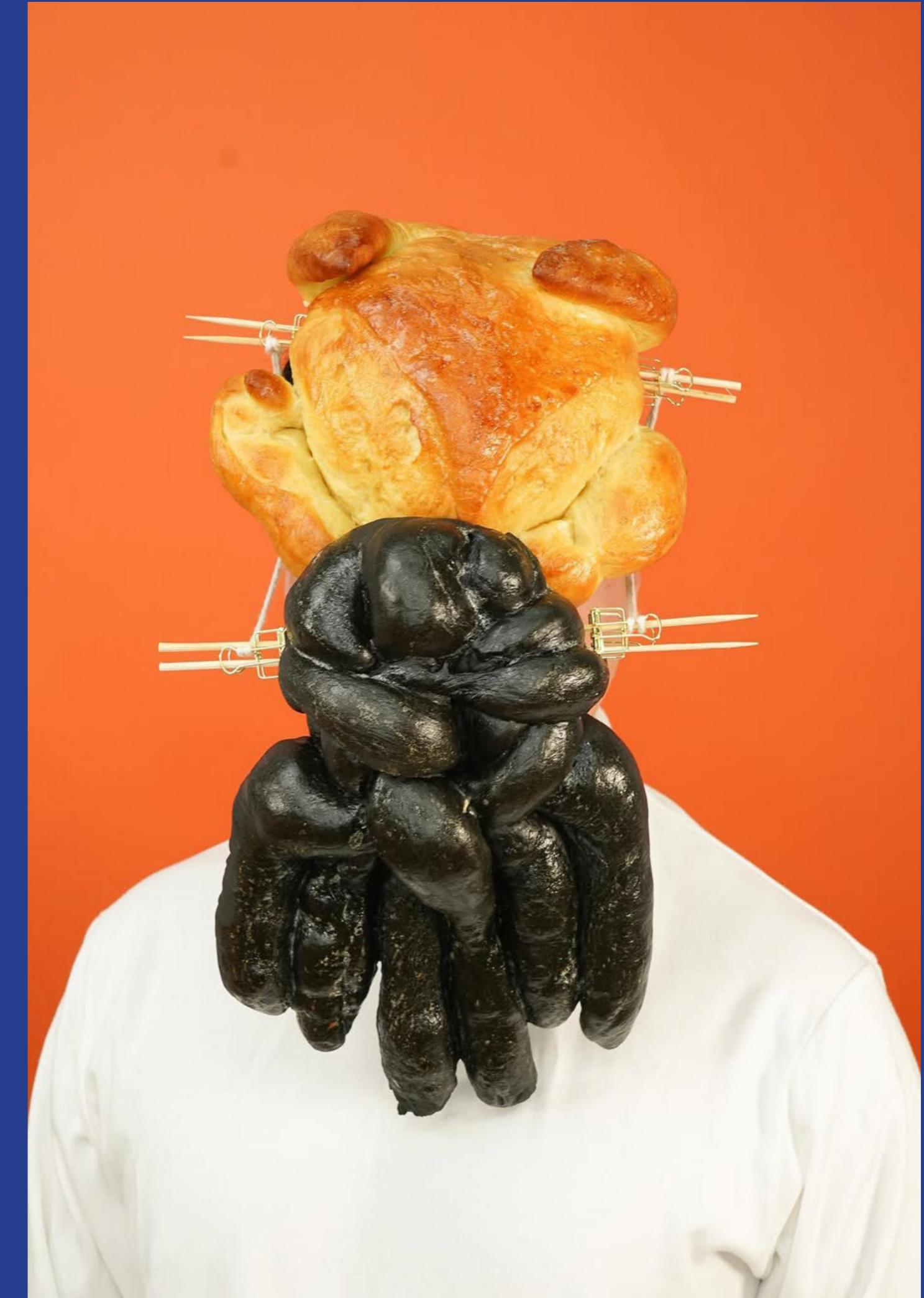
*"The Future of
Ethical Eating
in Asia"*



"Forbidden Bites: What we eat defines us. What we forbid reveals even more."

"Growing up, I was fascinated by the idea that something considered a delicacy in one country could be seen as horrifying in another. Why do some cultures prize a delicacy while others fight to ban it? Why are some delicacies both a luxury and a lethal risk? And how is the modern world reshaping traditional food customs.

Food is more than just fuel it is culture, history, and identity. But throughout history, societies have drawn lines between what is acceptable to eat and what is not. Some foods are banned for health reasons, others for ethical concerns, and some remain legal but spark intense debates. In this issue, we take a deep dive into the forbidden side of East Asian cuisine foods that have been outlawed, challenged, or shrouded in secrecy.



FORBIDDEN FOOD

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The Banned List

Outlawed eats- Foods that are banned

Several foods have been banned or restricted in East Asia due to health risks, environmental concerns, ethical issues, and international trade regulations. Governments and health organizations impose these restrictions to protect consumers, preserve endangered species, and align with evolving societal values. Some foods pose serious health risks, such as fugu (pufferfish) with its deadly neurotoxin or unpasteurized cheese prone to bacterial contamination. Others, like shark fin soup and wild turtle soup, are banned to protect endangered species. While some bans are strictly enforced, others remain flexible, fueling underground markets and ongoing cultural debates over traditional food practices.

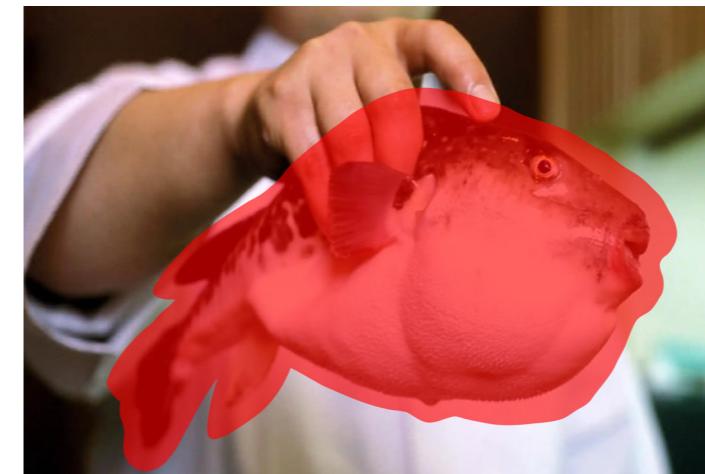


FUGU (PUFFERFISH)



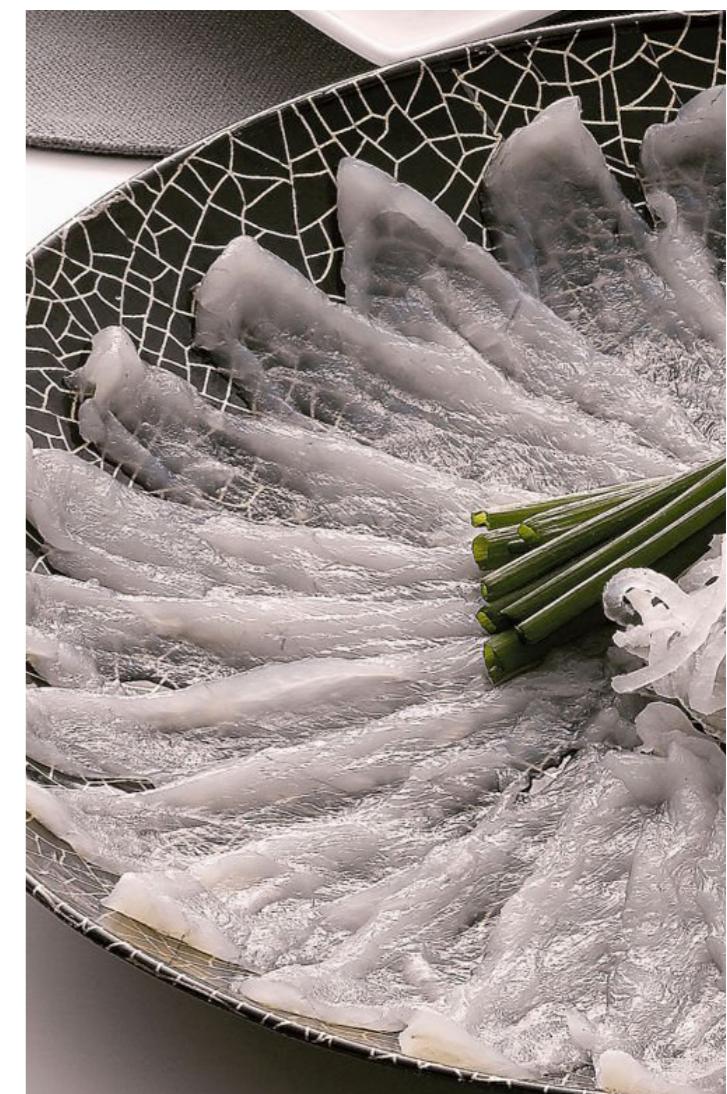
Fugu, or puffer fish, are luxury fish that are used as ingredients in food eaten all year round in Japan. These fish are actually poisonous, and they can only be served at restaurants in Japan where a qualified fugu handler works. Because of this system managed in general by the Japanese government, you can rest assured as you eat fugu. There are about 350 types of puffer fish around the world, and about 35 types of fugu in the seas around Japan. Many types of fugu are highly poisonous. The poison called tetrodotoxin in fugu is said to be 1,000 times stronger than potassium cyanide. The poisonous areas vary depending on the type of fugu, so it is extremely dangerous. For this reason, there are qualified fugu handlers who have the right skills and knowledge.

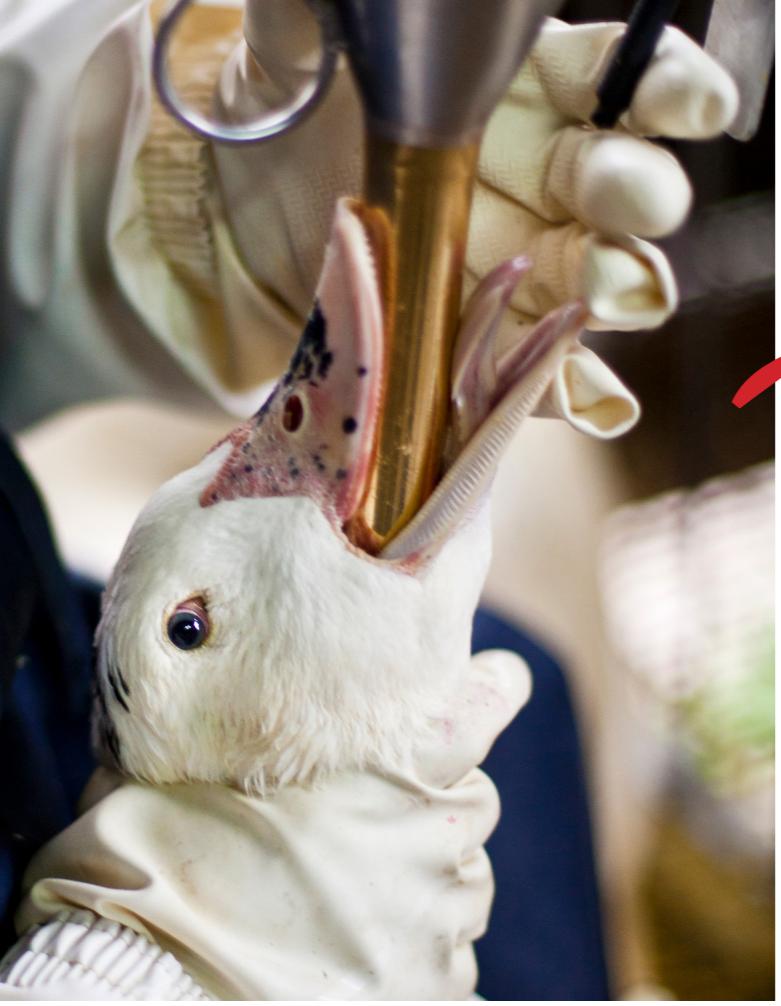
There are about 22 types of fugu used for food in Japan. Fugu are high in protein and low in calories, and they have many nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, making them a tasty food that is good for beauty and health. In Japan, people say that someone "wants to eat fugu but does not want to lose their life" ("Fugu wa kuitashi inochi wa oshishi" in Japanese) when referring to someone who is hesitating about taking action for something that is dangerous. Japan is an island surrounded by the sea, and people in the country used creative methods to prepare and eat fugu since ancient times,



Even earlier than the 4th century BC. There were many wars within Japan around the 17th century AD. Many soldiers suffered from fugu poisoning at this time, and so a decree was issued to ban people from eating fugu. At the end of the 19th century, Western culture spread across Japan, the ban on eating fugu was removed in Yamaguchi Prefecture, owing to action from Prime Minister Hirobumi Ito. The ban was taken away across Japan, bit by bit. This demonstrates how fugu have been an appealing type of food for Japanese people since ancient times.

Fugu is sliced thinly relative to other fish because the flesh is tough. If it was sliced as thick as other fish, you would be sitting there chewing for a long time. A nice side effect of it being sliced so thinly is that sashimi is translucent and it makes for a beautiful presentation when arranged, commonly as a flower.





A Gourmet Dish or a Moral Dilemma? **FOIE GRAS**

Foie gras, a French delicacy made from the fattened liver of ducks or geese, has faced bans and restrictions in parts of China due to ethical concerns, shifting consumer preferences, and global pressure from animal welfare organizations. The primary reason behind these bans is the controversial force feeding process (gavage), where birds are fed large amounts of food through a tube to rapidly enlarge their livers. This practice has been widely criticized by animal rights activists and organizations such as PETA and the World Animal Protection group, which argue that it causes extreme distress and suffering to the animals.

While China is one of the world's largest consumers of poultry products, the production and sale of foie gras have been restricted in certain regions due to increasing concerns over animal cruelty. Some local governments have imposed bans on its sale, particularly in areas where international organizations and ethical food movements have gained influence. Additionally, as China's middle class grows, there has been a rising demand for more ethical and sustainable food options, leading some restaurants and suppliers to move away from controversial products like foie gras.

Despite these bans, foie gras is still available in parts of China, especially in high-end restaurants in cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where it is often imported from France. However, its consumption remains a topic of debate, with many calling for lab-grown or plant-based alternatives as a more ethical substitute.

Beyond ethics, changing culinary preferences also contribute to foie gras restrictions. As China's middle class becomes more conscious of sustainable and cruelty-free dining, demand for alternative gourmet experiences is rising. Some high-end restaurants have responded by offering ethical foie gras alternatives, such as naturally fattened duck livers or plant-based substitutes that mimic the delicacy's rich texture and taste.

Another challenge is the black-market foie gras trade. In areas where restrictions exist, underground supply chains have emerged, allowing elite customers to continue enjoying the dish despite ethical or regulatory concerns. This highlights a broader issue in China's food industry, where demand for banned or controversial products often fuels illegal trade.

Wild Turtle Soup

Wild turtle soup has long been a delicacy in China and Taiwan, valued not only for its rich, gelatinous texture but also for its perceived medicinal benefits. Traditional Chinese medicine associates turtle meat with improving vitality, strengthening the immune system, and promoting longevity. For centuries, this dish was consumed by emperors and elites, symbolizing wealth and health. However, growing environmental concerns, declining turtle populations, and ethical considerations have led to strict bans on the capture and sale of wild turtles in both China and Taiwan. One of the primary reasons for the ban is conservation.

Many turtle species, particularly softshell turtles and sea turtles, have suffered dramatic population declines due to overhunting and habitat destruction. As demand for turtle meat increased, wild populations could not recover, leading to their classification as endangered species. In response, both China and Taiwan implemented wildlife protection laws to prevent the illegal hunting and trading of turtles. Global conservation organizations have also pressured governments to take stronger action against poaching and the black-market trade of turtles.

Beyond environmental concerns, food safety issues have also contributed to the ban. Wild turtles often carry harmful bacteria, parasites, and high levels of heavy metals, which can pose serious health risks when consumed. Despite the ban, an underground market for wild turtle meat still exists, with some consumers willing to pay premium prices for what they consider a rare and prestigious dish. While farmed turtle meat remains legal and is used in some restaurants, conservationists argue that turtle farming is unsustainable and ethically questionable, as it does not fully eliminate pressure on wild populations.



*Taste vs.
Extinction: The
Truth About
Turtle Soup.*



Is a Bowl
of Soup
Worth an
Extinct
Species?

”

The Shadowy World of Black Market Food Trading in East Asia.

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In the bustling markets of China, Japan, and Korea, a hidden industry flourishes beneath the surface black-market food trading. Driven by demand for banned, rare, or highly regulated delicacies, this underground economy operates beyond the reach of authorities, defying government restrictions and endangering public health, wildlife, and ethical food practices. While some of these foods are illegal due to safety concerns, others are banned to protect endangered species or enforce ethical food standards. Despite strict regulations, smuggling networks and underground vendors continue to cater to those willing to pay a premium for these forbidden flavors.



***Smuggled,
Stolen,
Savored***

The rise of illegal food trading in East Asia is fueled by cultural traditions, consumer demand, and regulatory loopholes. Many of these banned foods hold deep historical and medicinal significance, making them highly sought after despite their illegality. In other cases, restrictions on food safety or wildlife conservation have led to underground supply chains that cater to those unwilling to abandon their traditional diets. Black-market foods include exotic and endangered wildlife, such as bear bile, pangolin scales, tiger bones, and turtle meat, which are illegally trafficked across China, Vietnam, and Korea.



These items are primarily used in traditional medicine or served as status-symbol delicacies. The hunting and trading of these animals have led to devastating impacts on global wildlife populations. Illegal seafood smuggling is another major issue, particularly in China and Taiwan, where endangered giant clams, abalone, and rare lobsters are secretly imported despite strict fishing regulations. Additionally, due to trade restrictions, North Korea has been reported to smuggle pork and beef into China, bypassing food safety laws.

How the black market operates?

On 2 July 2012, the State Council of the People's Republic of China declared that shark fin soup can no longer be served at official banquets. This ban may take up to three years to take effect because of the social significance of the dish in Chinese culture.

Despite growing global opposition and stricter regulations, the illegal shark fin trade continues to thrive in East Asia, particularly in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Shark fin soup, a traditional delicacy often associated with wealth and prestige, remains in high demand, fueling a black-market industry that threatens global shark populations. The harsh reality behind this trade involves illegal fishing, smuggling, and severe environmental consequences, pushing many shark species to the brink of extinction.



Many countries have banned shark finning, a brutal practice where fishermen cut off a shark's fins and discard its still-living body back into the ocean, leaving it to suffocate or be eaten by predators. However, illegal fishing fleets continue to operate in remote waters, targeting endangered species such as hammerhead, whale, and thresher sharks. These fins are then smuggled into East Asian markets, often mislabeled or hidden among other seafood products to evade detection.

Hong Kong remains a major hub for the illegal shark fin trade, processing and distributing fins to mainland China, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Smugglers often exploit legal loopholes by mixing legally obtained fins with those from protected species, making enforcement difficult. Additionally, shipments of shark fins are frequently misdeclared as dried seafood to bypass customs regulations.





The Secret World of Illegal Whale Meat

Despite global bans and international criticism, illegal whale meat continues to find its way onto plates in Japan's hidden restaurants. Though Japan officially withdrew from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2019 to resume commercial whaling within its waters, the sale and consumption of whale meat from protected species or foreign waters remain illegal. However, a black market for whale meat persists, with unregistered suppliers distributing meat to underground restaurants and exclusive dining clubs. This trade raises serious concerns about wildlife conservation, ethical dining, and the enforcement of international regulations.

For centuries, whale meat has been part of Japanese culinary tradition, particularly in coastal communities where it was once a staple protein source. During post-war Japan, whale meat became an essential food source due to widespread food shortages. However, as Japan's economy grew and food options expanded, whale consumption declined significantly. Today, whale meat is more of a niche delicacy, often consumed by older generations who associate it with nostalgia.

Despite Japan's continued commercial whaling operations, demand for whale meat has dropped, leaving large government stockpiles unsold. However, rare and exotic cuts of whale meat particularly from protected species are still highly sought after by a small but wealthy group of consumers, fueling the black market trade.

While Japan has regulatory agencies tasked with monitoring whale meat distribution, the black market thrives due to weak enforcement, corruption, and loopholes in the legal system. Since commercial whaling is legal in Japan, it becomes difficult to differentiate legally obtained whale meat from illegally sourced meat without extensive genetic testing. Additionally, the secrecy of underground restaurants makes it challenging for authorities to track sales.

International pressure from conservation groups has called for stricter crackdowns on the trade, but Japan's cultural and political ties to whaling make it a sensitive issue. Some officials argue that whale meat consumption is a cultural right, while others acknowledge that demand is shrinking even without government intervention.

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While Japan continues its legal whaling operations, the black market for illegal whale meat is likely to decline as awareness grows and younger generations lose interest in eating whale.

Conservationists continue to push for stronger regulations, international cooperation, and sustainable seafood alternatives to end the illegal trade. However, as long as a market remains for rare and exotic whale cuts, and enforcement remains weak, the secretive world of underground whale meat restaurants will continue to operate in the shadows of Japan's food culture. The question remains: Will tradition outweigh conservation, or will the future bring an end to illegal whaling once and for all?



Loopholes and Secrecy: The Battle to Enforce the Ban.

BUDDHISM AND THE MEAT DEBATE

In China, the debate around Buddhism and meat consumption centers on the traditional Buddhist belief that eating meat is against the principle of non-violence, leading many Chinese Buddhists to practice vegetarianism, particularly abstaining from beef, which is considered especially taboo due to the influence of Indian Buddhist traditions that revere cows; however, not all Buddhists in China strictly adhere to a vegetarian diet, with variations in practice depending on individual interpretation and regional customs.

Being minimally Buddhist requires the practitioner to follow at least the first precept of non-killing. When someone makes a commitment to become a part of the Buddhist Community (called Sangha), the Buddha asks them to take five basic precepts. The first precept is usually formulated along these lines: "I shall abstain from destroying any breathing beings." This tradition of precept-taking was introduced by the Buddha himself. The implication is that the first precept pertains to all living sentient creatures. Dedicated practitioners will go to great lengths to avoid destroying any life, to the extent of being careful where they step so that they do not squash even an ant.



Buddhist teachings on meat:
The core Buddhist belief is that killing any living being causes suffering, and therefore, eating meat is generally seen as an act of violence that should be avoided.

Beef taboo in China:
A significant aspect of the meat debate in Chinese Buddhism is the strong aversion to beef, stemming from the belief that the cow is a sacred animal.

Variations in practice:
While many Chinese Buddhists strive to be vegetarian, not all adhere to a strict meat-free diet. Some may only abstain from certain types of meat or eat meat on specific occasions.

Cultural influence:
The practice of vegetarianism within Chinese Buddhism has been significantly influenced by the cultural context, with some traditions emphasizing the merit gained by abstaining from meat.



THE DOG MEAT CONTROVERSY

Behind Bars, Not in Homes – End the Suffering.



The dog meat industry is currently heavily restricted and soon to be illegal in South Korea. On January 9, 2024, the National Assembly of South Korea unanimously passed a law banning the production and sale of dog meat, to take effect in three years. The three-year window allows for farmers to find other sources of income. According to a 2020 survey of South Koreans, 83.8% of respondents reported to never having consumed dog meat before. While most scholars believe there is no evidence that dog meat has ever been a key part of the Korean diet, the rate of consumption, legislation, and cultural practices surrounding its consumption have changed over several thousand years. For example, during the Silla (57 BCE – 935 CE) and Goryeo (918–1392 CE) periods, the practice was uncommon as vegetarianism was advocated by Buddhism.



Culture or Cruelty?
The Unsettling Debate Over Dog Meat



Consumption of dog meat has experienced a precipitous decline over the past three decades in South Korea. This has been attributed to changes in legislation, the demographic decline of the minority that consumes dog meat, and the increasing number of dogs owned as pets. Estimates of the number of animals consumed vary widely and are the subject of significant debate. Foreign media often quotes estimates of one or two million dogs consumed per year (statistics often produced by the animal rights group KARA), but some question the accuracy of the statistic. In 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs reported the existence of 200 registered dog farms, although it suspected there were still unregistered farms in the country.

The largest dog meat market, Moran Market, officially shut down in 2018 following years of declining sales; though, some illegal sales were discovered in 2021. In 2018, the Taepyeong-dong complex, which served as a slaughterhouse for dogs, was closed by the South Korean government. This move came five years after a vote by the city council of Seongnam, the city where the slaughterhouse was located.

THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL DELICACIES



Century eggs, also known as pidan, are one of China's most polarizing delicacies. These preserved duck, chicken, or quail eggs are made by curing them in a mixture of clay, ash, salt, quicklime, and rice hulls for several weeks or months. The result is a translucent black or dark green egg with a creamy yolk and an intense ammonia-like aroma. Some praise it as a nutrient-rich superfood, packed with protein and essential minerals, while others find its bold smell and jelly-like texture off-putting. It is commonly enjoyed with congee, tofu, or pickled ginger, making it a staple in Chinese cuisine.

The unique color, texture, and strong aroma come from a chemical reaction during the preservation process. The curing ingredients break down proteins and fats in the egg, increasing its alkalinity and creating a distinctive umami-rich flavor. Despite its cultural significance, century eggs continue to divide opinions globally—while some admire their rich, savory taste, others can't overcome the strong smell and unusual texture. Whether you see it as a delicacy or an acquired taste, one thing is certain: century eggs remain a symbol of China's bold and diverse food culture.

Savored by Some, Shunned by Others—The World's Most Controversial Eats.



Ikizukuri, meaning "prepared alive", is one of Japan's most controversial yet revered culinary traditions. This practice involves selecting a live fish, squid, or shrimp, skillfully slicing it into sashimi while keeping it partially alive, and serving it immediately—often with the fish's gills still moving or its heart still beating. For many, ikizukuri represents the pinnacle of freshness and craftsmanship, as chefs must be highly trained to execute precise cuts without instantly killing the seafood. This delicacy is particularly popular in high-end sushi restaurants, where diners value the experience of eating fish at its absolute freshest.

However, the practice has drawn intense criticism from animal rights activists and ethical food advocates, who argue that it prioritizes spectacle over humane treatment. Studies suggest that fish and other sea creatures can feel pain, raising concerns about whether keeping them alive during preparation is unnecessarily cruel. Some countries and regions have banned ikizukuri, while certain Japanese restaurants have opted to remove it from their menus in response to shifting attitudes toward animal welfare. Yet, for many traditionalists, ikizukuri remains an integral part of Japanese gastronomy, fueling an ongoing debate over how far cultural preservation should go in the face of evolving ethical concerns..



Sannakji, one of Korea's most controversial delicacies, is a dish of live baby octopus, freshly cut into pieces and served while still moving. For adventurous food lovers, the appeal lies in its unique texture, freshness, and the challenge of eating a dish that's still wriggling. The octopus' suction cups remain active, making it possible for the pieces to cling to the tongue or throat, a reason why diners are often warned to chew thoroughly to prevent choking.

While some praise sannakji as an authentic Korean experience, the dish has sparked significant ethical concerns. Animal rights activists argue that serving seafood while it is still alive or semi-conscious is inhumane and unnecessary. Scientific studies suggest that octopuses are highly intelligent and capable of experiencing pain, making the method of preparation a subject of growing debate. Critics claim that killing octopuses moments before consumption could be more humane, while supporters insist that the practice is rooted in Korean culinary tradition. As more diners become aware of ethical food consumption, there is a growing call for humane alternatives in traditional dishes. Some chefs have started modifying the preparation method by killing the octopus instantly before serving, rather than cutting it while still alive.

THE FUTURE OF FOBIDDEN FOODS

Can Lab-Grown Meat Solve Ethical Issues?

With growing bans on controversial foods like foie gras, shark fin, and exotic meats, lab-grown meat is being hailed as a revolutionary solution to some of the world's most pressing ethical and environmental concerns. Produced using cultured animal cells, this technology allows for the creation of real meat without the need for animal slaughter, deforestation, or excessive resource consumption. In East Asia, where culinary heritage and food ethics often collide, lab-grown alternatives present a unique opportunity to preserve traditional dishes without the moral and ecological costs. Singapore has already paved the way by becoming the first country to approve the sale of lab-grown chicken, setting a precedent for the region.

Supporters argue that lab-grown meat can eliminate animal cruelty, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and protect endangered species—offering a future where food traditions can evolve without harm. Imagine shark fin soup without the killing of sharks or foie gras without force-feeding ducks—this is the vision driving research in China and Japan, where governments and private companies are investing heavily in cultivated meat technology. However, skepticism remains. Many consumers question whether lab-grown meat can truly replicate the taste, texture, and cultural experience of traditional dishes. Additionally, high production costs and regulatory barriers continue to slow its widespread adoption.

Despite these challenges, the momentum behind lab-grown meat continues to grow. As technology advances and awareness increases, it has the potential to reshape food culture, offering a middle ground between preserving heritage and embracing sustainability. The question remains: will consumers be willing to embrace lab-grown versions of their favorite delicacies, or will tradition prove stronger than ethics?

Plant-Based Revolution in Asia.

Asia, home to some of the world's most meat-centric cuisines, is now at the forefront of a plant-based food revolution. Driven by concerns over animal welfare, sustainability, and food security, more consumers are turning to vegan and plant-based alternatives to their favorite meats. While vegetarianism has long been rooted in Asian cultures—particularly in Buddhist temple cuisine—recent advancements in food technology are making plant-based meats, seafood, and eggs more appealing than ever. From plant-based pork and beef in China to vegan eel and fish cakes in Japan, companies are crafting alternatives that replicate the flavor, texture, and culinary experience of traditional dishes.

A key driver of this transformation is the growing demand for ethical and sustainable food options, particularly among younger consumers. Startups and food giants alike are investing in plant-based products, with brands like OmniFoods, Green Rebel, and Next Meats leading the way in developing alternatives to pork, beef, and even controversial foods like foie gras and shark fin. Supermarkets and restaurants across Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore are expanding their plant-based menus, catering to an evolving market that seeks guilt-free indulgence.

Governments and investors are increasingly recognizing plant-based meat as a solution to climate change and food scarcity. Countries like Singapore, which became the first nation to approve lab-grown meat, are also supporting plant-based innovations through funding and regulatory approvals. Meanwhile, China has set ambitious goals to reduce meat consumption, with the government encouraging plant-based protein as part of its national dietary guidelines.



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