

Disclaimer: The following is a true story and is intended for mature audiences only. This writing contains strong language, graphic scenes of violence and senseless butchery. Those who are faint of heart should refrain from reading further. You have been warned. It is also a long story. Did I mention it was true?

The Epic Adventure Of ROB VERSUS THE EEL

This happened to me over the holidays and has left me scarred, literally, for life. I am not by nature a squeamish person, although Karen has the responsibility to dispose of any flying insects that intrude on our household. But just thinking of the events which transpired this past December still causes the hair on my arms to rise up, my breath to run short and my heart to beat faster.

I should begin by describing my relationship with George, who is a dear friend and colleague. We share a love for exotic foods and often gather at his place for elaborate dinners featuring food stuffs from which most people would run away screaming. George emailed me after Christmas and announced he was having a "Fruits Of The Sea" dinner. The game was afoot.

I decided my contribution to the dinner would be an Eel Pie. I had been making tortieres and other meat pies over the holidays and happened across a recipe for a classic English eel pie. In fact the recipe comes from the famed Eel Pie Island in the Thames, thus giving the recipe the unfortunate name of Eel Pie Island Pie - brought to you by the Department of Redundancy Department.

This recipe called out to me from the pages of our cook book because the old Knob Hill Farms mega-store, up the street from us on Lansdowne, had been replaced with a brand spanking new No Frills mega-store - and their fish department is nothing less than astonishing. The front counter has the usual display of whole fish and fillets laid out on beds of ice, but beneath the counter sits a massive water tank filled with teeming schools of live tilapi, trout, catfish as long as your arm, lobsters, crabs, mussels, clams, snails and (of course) eels.

I had my recipe. I had my source for eels. I was ready for action.

Saturday morning at the store. Things were slow in the fish department. I approached the counter and was greeted by two very young Portuguese women who were obviously new to the trade but wore their blue smocks, hair nets and aprons with confident pride. One busied herself by carefully wrapping individual salmon fillets in saran wrap, delicately folding over each layer with her fingers raised as though she were diapering someone else's new born babe. The other woman stood idly by, wearing a thick pair of blue rubber gloves, posed like a surgeon waiting for her cue to enter the theatre. They both greeted me with beaming smiles.

"Good morning, I'd like to buy an eel.", I said.

Their smiles froze and there was an awkward moment of silence. I wasn't sure if I said something wrong or socially unacceptable so I added: "You do have eels, don't you?"

The two women exchanged a look. Salmon Gal, as I shall call her, returned to wrapping her fillets. Glove Gal wiggled her upraised fingers and nodded. "Yup, usually we do, but I don't think there's any left."

"There's one left.", said Salmon Gal, without looking at her friend, and keeping conspicuously busy with her wrapping chores. "I saw it in there this morning."

Glove Gal peered in the tank without stepping any closer to it. "You sure?"

"Yeah, it was in there this morning."

Glove Gal looked up at me with upraised eyebrows. "You want an eel?"

"Yes, please. Can you get it for me?"

Gloved Gal peered back down at the tank and starting waving her hands about. "I think we should get Joe for this."

She called for Joe and out from the back room shuffled a wizened old Chinese man wearing a bloody apron and a baseball cap. He walked with his elbows up and out and always bore a broad toothy grin. He spoke with a very thick Chinese accent. "You wanna buy a eel?!", he shouted at me from all of two feet away, "Okay, I get the net for you!"

Joe pulled out a long handled fishing net, more suited to cleaning an olympic sized swimming pool, and began violently trolling it back and forth through the fish tank. The catfish roiled about, trying to escape, churning the water into a slimy froth. Both of the Gals watched in amazement. With a huge grunt Joe pulled out the net. In it was a massive catfish and a nice fat grey eel. Joe was obviously a pro at this eel racket. He whacked the bottom of the net with his free hand sending the catfish arcing through the air and right back into the tank, at the same time sending the eel flying out of the net to land with a wet slap on the tiled floor. On stage he would have received a round of applause. I stood gaping. Gloved Gal took a step back. Salmon Gal crumpled her saran wrap.

With a quick dance, Joe slipped the eel into a plastic bag and held it out for me with a huge grin. Inside the bag the eel was tumbling over itself in its efforts to get free.

"Uh, could you kill it for me?", I asked.

"Oh sure!", shouted Joe, where upon he executed a jumping slam dunk with the bag, smashing the eel onto the floor with a sickening whap that echoed off the tile walls. The Gal's stared with wide eyes and gaping mouths, looking very much like some of the fish on ice. Joe picked up the bagged eel and held it out at arms length. The eel was still very much alive. Joe shook his head and muttered to himself as he shuffled, elbows akimbo, to the back counter.

Gloved Gal looked at and attempted a smile. "You're lucky Joe's here today."

At the back counter Joe slipped the eel out of the bag and with three deft moves cut the mid-belly horizontally, sliced it vertically up to the head and then ran his thumb up through the inside ploughing out all of the vital organs which spilled into the metal sink.

"Oh my god.", whispered Gloved Gal. Salmon Gal craned her neck to see. "What? What happened?" Before Gloved Gal could respond the eel had slipped off the counter, hit the floor with another wet splat and proceeded to make a spirited break for the back door.

The eel had no guts. Nothing. It was completely empty inside. Yet it still writhed across the floor as if nothing in the world would ever prevent it from getting back to the waters it once called home.

Joe grabbed up the eel and plunged it back into the plastic bag and set it on the scales with a dismissive gesture that seemed to say: This is women's work. He shuffled back to clean the sink, leaving Gloved Gal to do the honours. Standing as far back as she could from the still writhing bag of eel, Gloved Gal attempted to punch the buttons of the electronic scale with her blue rubber clad fingers; but the eel was still very much alive and its constrained thrashing made the numbers on the scale bounce from high to low with such rapidity that it was impossible for the squeamish Gloved Gal to get an accurate price.

"Joe? We need some help here."

Joe grumbled his way back to the front counter and whisked the bag off the scale. "You want me to cut off the head?!", he barked at me. I nodded, unable to speak. Joe flung the bag on the back counter, slipped out the eel and, using a cleaver, clobbered it with such force as to make the two Gals jump in their shoes. The beheaded eel was presented once again for weighing. It was still writhing about in the bag but this time the scale could handle it.

Joe made a muttering exit to the back room, wiping his hands on his apron. Gloved Gal stuck the price sticker on the bag and handed it to me. Salmon Gal stared at the shifting mass of eel.

"Remind me again why we took this job.", she said to her friend, who responded: "We don't have to say 'You want fries with that?'"

They both nodded, unsure of their career choice and wished me well with whatever plans I had for the headless, gutless, still moving fruit of the sea.

Getting through the check out counter was surprisingly easy, although the cashier didn't take her eyes off the bag as she checked through my other items. Strolling home I felt flushed with success at having bagged the last eel in the store. The gods were with me. I was eager to finish my little culinary project and present George with a delicious eel pie.

The bagged eel was left on our kitchen counter as I made the other preparations necessary to form and cook a pie. Every once in a while I would poke the bag and the body of the eel would convulse a little but certainly far less than the antics it displayed back at the store. I was finally ready to skin and fillet the eel. I opened the bag, poured the eel onto the counter and turned away to get a sharp knife and a fork.

As I turned back to the eel I was confronted with the spectre of a headless gutless beast that - without any exaggeration - raised itself up off the counter and, without benefit of eyes, turned its severed end to 'look' at me.

In the next room Karen heard me make a noise that could possibly be spelled: "Nyaaaa-ah-aah!". Those of you familiar with the vocal charms of Curly from the Three Stooges will know immediately how to pronounce the utterance. It's not a normal sound. It's the sound of someone who is freaked out and has lost the ability to communicate with anything other than guttural vowels. Karen stuck her head in the kitchen door and asked: "Is everything okay?"

I was, at that point, standing back much in the manner of Gloved Gal, poking at the eel with the knife, trying to keep it on the counter. "This thing has no head, it has no guts and it looked at me! It's still moving. It's still alive!"

Karen nodded sagely and, as she went out, said: "Just don't cut yourself." I took a deep breath and proceeded with my task to skin and fillet the beast.

Now, in the cookbook with the eel pie recipe it suggests the best way to skin an eel is to make an incision at the base of the head, grip the head firmly and simply peel the skin down and off the length of the body. All well and good except the head was back in Joe's sink and the slippery writhing body gave me little purchase with which to execute such a manoeuvre. Nothing else to do except jab a fork into the thing, pinning it to the cutting board, and pull the skin off from there.

So much easier said than done.

My first attempt at sticking a fork into the eel were thwarted by the fact that an eel's skin is very flexible and very tough, making it exceedingly difficult to penetrate. It also didn't help that the eel, in the warmth of our kitchen, had renewed its vigorous quest for freedom and was now actively resisting any effort on my part to hold it, spear it, skewer it, cut it or otherwise handle it in a manner to which we have become accustomed when dealing with other more compliant food stuffs. This food was fighting back.

Cutting raw meat of any sort has its perils if one is unfamiliar with how to handle a knife, or judge the grain of the meat, or if the flesh in question is in any way tough or slippery. Add to this the added dimension of cutting something while it was still alive. Imagine carving a steak off a cow while it still stands in the field. The thing is going to complain.

Except this 'thing' was supposed to be dead. It didn't have a head, for crying out loud. There were no vital organs. It was not supposed to fight back. But it did. No matter how I tried to grip it, or pin it down, or cut at it, the eel would respond by recoiling and twisting and bunching up its muscles in an effort to get away. Please bear in mind this was not just twitching and contractions that are sometimes observed in the freshly dead of any species. This thing was moving and it was moving with intent.

I was aghast. By this time it had been a good two hours since Joe first spiked this little beggar into the floor and it was still putting up a fight. I was covered in sweat and eel grease - they are very oily, fatty creatures and the goop that exudes from them dries on your skin like Bondfast glue, shrinking as it dries, refusing to wash off in water, so you are forced to peel off these layers of coagulated grease hoping you are not also pulling off a layer of your own skin in the process - this was not at all the joyful kitchen experience I had so looked forward to.

My respect for the eel was immense but I refused to be bested by a creature already dead. The stupid thing just wasn't smart enough to know it was already dead. Or perhaps it was such a rudimentary beast that the bulk of its bodily functions aren't controlled by a central nervous system, instead residing throughout the entire corpus. Or maybe it was the devouring spawn of Satan, the vanguard of an invading army from Mars, the Freudian nightmare of all men made manifest on the counter of my kitchen in Parkdale.

Or maybe it was just an eel that was destined to be made into pie.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself for battle. With a clenched growl I plunged the fork into its back and ground it down, hard against the flesh, driving the metal deep inside. The creature arched its back in response, trying to lift itself off the counter. I pushed back, refusing to allow any escape. The eel pushed back harder and bent the fork. I shit you not, the damned thing bent my frickin' fork! "No way!", I shouted in stunned disbelief and raised up the knife like Abraham.

Through all of this encounter Henry was, thankfully, busy watching TV. Karen was in the next room reading and would occasionally respond to my guttural cursing with questions like: "Everything okay?" to which I would respond with a breathless: "Oh yeah, almost done." But now the sound Karen heard was akin to the high pitched squealing of a distraught little girl.

The eel, realizing I would not release it from the bent fork, had lifted its tail and wrapped it around my wrist.

AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!

Okay. This thing is the monster from the movie Alien. It is not of this Earth. It was killed over two hours ago, gutted and beheaded, and now it was rising up from the dead and grabbing my hand. I squealed like the aforementioned girl and immediately starting hitting at it with the knife in my hand, trying to make it let go.

Something to remember when slaughtering eels is to never panic and begin slashing at your own hands with a sharp knife. Not a good thing to do.

The knife blade dug into my left hand just at the first knuckle, leaving a neat V-shaped cut that flapped open and bled freely. An eighth of an inch to the right and it would have severed the tendon to my index finger.

I shook off the offending serpent and retreated to the kitchen sink. As I washed my hand, peeling eel grease out of the wound, and bandaged myself, my anger boiled up inside of me. How dare such a simple creature attack me? After all, I am a superior being. I reside relatively high on the food chain. I am a human being, dammit! That thing's not going to get the best of ME!

What followed was a monumental struggle between the forces of good and evil the likes of which have not been witnessed upon this Earth since the days of the Old Testament. It was a knock down, drag out, no holds barred, biblical battle. I had an obvious edge in the melee since I had both weapons and opposable thumbs whilst the evil eel had no head, no heart, no lungs, no liver, no - you get the picture.

It took me another half hour to hack the eel into smaller, theoretically more manageable chunks. By the time I was finished I had five pieces, each approximately four inches in length, scattered across the counter.

And still it moved.

Despite being disabled, the eel's skin remained on the flesh and had to be removed before I could cut the meat off the bone. Karen strolled past and suggested I change my plans and just buy a shrimp ring for the party. No way. I was in for the long haul now. I was determined to make this fat, greasy, stubborn, disgusting worm into a pie.

I settled for putting the pieces on a plate and stuffing it in the fridge for a while as I cleaned up and calmed my frazzled nerves.

One half hour and a tumbler of gin later, I removed the plate from the fridge and discovered the pieces were still trying to crawl off the plate. This was getting ridiculous. I set to work, braver now for my experiences and wounds received in battle, and slowly, slipperingly, relentlessly peeled the skin off the segmented portions of the eel.

I paused to survey my handiwork, pleased with the bunched up pile of eel skin set to one side and at the same time appalled at the naked chunks of meat that twisted and coiled about on the plate.

Filleting moving flesh is not an easy task and I shan't bore you with the details but suffice to say it took another half hour to complete, by which time the skin and bones were off to one side and very much immobile. The sliced portions of eel meat continued to squirm. "For God's sake!", I hollered at the convulsing fillets, "Look at the rest of you over there! You're dead! Lie down! Give it up already!"

They didn't stop moving until, dredged in seasoned flour, I placed them in the hot buttered frying pan. Finally, at long last, my nemesis had succumbed.

O, brave eel.
Thou hast fought the good fight.
But now is the time
For warrior eel to die.
Now it is time
For eel to become pie.

The pie was absolutely delicious and a hit at George's dinner party. I would certainly make it and eat it again. After I had scraped handfuls of coagulated grease off the counter, the cutlery, the sink, my hands and my face, I checked the Joy Of Cooking in their "About Eels" section and was confronted with: "When it comes to cleaning or skinning an eel let a professional do it."

Thanks a pant load.

So that is the epic adventure of Rob versus the eel. The eel from hell. The eel that would not die. I wanted an exotic cooking experience and instead ended up re-enacting every classic B-movie and Horror-Slasher film in my kitchen.

Although I am no longer plagued with the feverish dreams that haunted me afterwards, I am a changed man. I have a scar on my hand that will always remind me to respect the feisty, determined and noble eel.

And I will always remember to say: "Uh, Joe, you want to skin and fillet that for me?"