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Food for thought: devouring brains with neuroscientists

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Before me is a horse's brain. It's pretty tiny. In fact, the dog's brain next to it on the table is almost as big. "Well, think of their foreheads, they don't have one," points out Ben Graham of brain injury charity Headway

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/http://www.headwayeastlondon.org/>)

East London. "Their head slopes straight back so they don't have much room." So, size isn't everything. "Whale brains are huge though," inserts Daniel Margulies

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/https://www.cbs.mpg.de/staff/margulies-10881>) from Germany's Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive & Brain Sciences. "Its motor sensory region is huge -- think of how much matter they have to move."

It's a lot of brain talk to digest when you're also staring at a quarter slice of poached calf brain, ready for delectation. Dressed elegantly with a sprinkling of home-pickled green elderberries, parsley, walnuts and a few spring sprigs of kale and broccoli, it's still a (horrifying) sight to behold. I take comfort in the fact that Margulies -- who spends his professional career trying to undo the neural pathway mysteries of the prefrontal cortex -- looks visibly disturbed. "I'm going to have a problem with this," he says under his breath to me.

This gaggle of brainsmiths has been corralled in Headway's east London headquarters to take part in a prequel to Guerrilla Science's Brain Banquet

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([/web/20140228111305/http://www.wired.co.uk](https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/http://www.wired.co.uk))
13-15 March. If you've not heard of Guerrilla Science, it's all that's good about interdisciplinary collaborations, bringing science, art, music and more together in installations, games, festivals and debates across the country.

"It's about getting people excited about science, and it's nothing like being back in the classroom," asserts Jen Wong, the group's Creative Director.

The Brain Banquet is a great example. It will bring together interactive art installations, a sensory five-course dinner and audience debates with Margulies and his collaborator Felicity Callard -- a senior lecturer at Durham University whose neuro-interests lie in the cultural and social history of medicine -- in a World War II bunker round the corner from Dalston Junction station. I get a hint of what's to come while at the Headway HQ -- we cover the concept of self-generated thought, the battle of getting MRI subjects to think of "nothing" in between exercises (it's impossible, we decide) and the trouble with separating personhood from human mechanics when it comes to grieving families refusing to donate a loved one's organs.

One of the best bits of the evening was having a member of Headway there to contest the neuroscientists' arguments and proffer his own insights into the cogs that run our lives, having suffered a brain injury himself. He does not believe in self-generated thought -- everything is the product of past knowledge and thus cannot be down to our own autonomy. A debate over consciousness versus self-generation promptly ensued, with the former software engineer deftly arguing his case.

Like the calves brains on our plates, talking about brain injuries and disabilities remains fairly taboo in our society. It's difficult to hear the very personal side to brain injury -- how it's makes it hard to keep a job, or relationships. I quickly realise while speaking with the Headway member that it's unfathomable we don't talk about it more. There would be no chance of a company being allowed to fire a person for a physically visible disability -- they would be instantly sued. When it comes to something as subtle as the brain, though, with victims learning as they go what's now normal for them, it becomes a tricky business and one that's massively compounded by a social reluctance to ask about it.

That's why, if you attend the event next month, ask questions. Headway members will be there, alongside Margulies and Callard, wandering through the various installations designed exactly to get you asking those questions. The Memory Clinic is a maze of test tubes where you can add your own written memory or read others'. It represents our only memory formation, and the frustrating chaos that can become if you've suffered a brain injury.

Agatha Haines' installation is all about modifying our own bodies. We're already debating the ethics of replacing healthy human organs or limbs for superior artificial ones (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-09/04/seeing-beyond-human-transhumanism>). Haines proposes bioprinting add-ons from rattlesnake, leech or electric eel cells to help us prevent blood clots or jolt the heart.

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Preserved animal heads will also be on show for attendees to query evolution and what makes us human, and the main event -- the food -- focuses on texture, considering many brain injury victims lose their sense of taste and smell.

From my experience, I can tell you that an egg yolk cooked at 63 degrees is squishy deliciousness that tastes weirdly artificial, and a calf brain is like milky tofu.

Funnily enough though, almost everyone polished their brains off (not, *theirs*... you know what I mean). I'm not sure if that was down to the As Clear As Gin cocktails we necked previously (a reference to Cerebrospinal fluid), or the fact we'd all mentally overprepared. But we get into a debate about how our cultural constructs and concepts of identity are probably still closely linked with the physical self. It's so uncommon in the UK, the culinary team Blanch & Shock sourced the brains from the Netherlands.

If you grow up in the UK, chances are your context for eating brain come from one place. It's why I immediately feel Hannibal Lecter references spring to mind while I'm sitting round the Guerilla Science dinner table, and why I resist joking about cleansing my palate with a dousing of piglet's blood -- what if people think I'm becoming Hannibal Lecter?

Of course there are plenty of cultures that have no qualms about gobbling up the whole animal, blood and all (China, I'm looking at you). One dear friend of mine was suitably horrified to find that the squid her "friend" had presented her with, which she dutifully consumed, was in fact pig's intestines. China, I'm looking at you again. But as the gentrification of offal continues, with the likes of Fergus Henderson's St John restaurant (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/https://www.stjohnsgroup.uk.com>) or ex-Noma chefs' Bror in Copenhagen (which delights in serving up bull's testicles and sheep head in a pot (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/http://www.norwegian.com/magazine/features/2014/01/headchefs>)) why aren't we prepared to say we love calf's brain?

Probably, because it really doesn't taste good.

Tickets to Brain Banquet are £45 and can be purchased here (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140228111305/http://www.wegotickets.com/searchresults/location>).

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