

# You can't grow Haggis in Lithuania *by David O'Neil*

It's been an interesting summer this year, but among the most intriguing events was my meeting with the chap from Vilnius. For those who are not au fait with the name, it is the capital city of Lithuania.

Our meeting was fortuitous as the man was at the time bemoaning the fact that haggis, of which he had grown inordinately fond, did not grow in Lithuania. As a haggis lover myself, I could well understand his heartfelt grief at this astonishing fact.

Why I said to myself, why should the hardy haggis not dwell, nay thrive in the temperate countryside of this pleasant Baltic country? Having thought upon the subject overnight I resolved that the lack of haggis in this unfairly penalised land, should be corrected, and that I would, being at a loose end lately, undertake the task.

I realised there was no point in jumping into this exercise without proper planning, after all the haggis farmers of Inverness-shire are rightly jealous of the quality of the product which demands the pinnacle of health and fitness from the raw material. They guard their flocks with care keeping a close eye on their security at all times. This despite the fact the haggis itself is a wild beast, even though it has been contained within boundaries for easier access for culling and harvesting to supply the national demand for the product, a demand subject to seasonal rises on November 30th and 25th January, St Andrew's night and Burn's Night respectively.

My task was to somehow extract a breeding pair without discovery. This task was much simpler than I anticipated, as I soon discovered that the Haggis in its natural habitat is a very loving affectionate creature, spending much of its life in the wild keeping close company with its mate. I merely had to select a suitable male to find the female partner proffering herself in the effort to keep her consort company.

My next sojourn into the Highlands placed me in a position to prove this assertion, Having been assured that the entire local farming population would be in attendance at the Black Istle Highland Show; I visited a farm of my acquaintance near Ballachulish and with a shrewd eye I selected a suitable creature, and no one being in sight at the time, I swept him up into the breast of my coat. As I anticipated his mate immediately raised such a din I had to sweep her up in a like manner. To my surprise and delight I discovered that the two small round furry balls of life nestled happily within my coat without protest. I found later that these friendly little creatures were always happiest when snuggled up together in a warm place, and that they also, for some reason, trust man!

The capture was thus simple, I gathered an armful of heather, their staple diet, and decamped

before I may be discovered by some irate farmer. I later discovered that the cuddly little creatures fed equally happily on hay.

I made an uneventful journey back home, the haggis pair relaxing within my Gladstone bag whilst the train covered the trip in its accustomed manner. I recall the lamb chops I had for luncheon were particularly good. Back in my rooms in London I tackled the problem of smuggling my captives, out of England and into Lithuania.

I hit upon a scheme for the export of haggis that would, I expected, deceive those officials tasked with the job of making life difficult for law abiding citizens the world over. It is illegal to export livestock falling within certain categories, needless to say my little friends fell within that zone, thus I could be liable for serious punishment were I discovered. Though the prospect of spending the rest of my life as a known felon was not a welcome one, I confess the thrill of the contest was no small inducement for me to risk all, and concentrate my mind on the ways to bypass or breach the official barriers, and as a Scot it was not beyond my native wit to devise a particularly suitable plan to achieve my ends.

The security of my captives was guaranteed by the use of a hairnet. This effectively kept my little friends in close confinement, a joy for them and a convenience for me. My simple ruse was to conceal the pair beneath my kilt, the comfortable garb of all true Highlanders, a race of whom I am a proud member. My McKenzie kilt hung to the knee and I found if I suspended the net with my pair, technically, brace, of haggis, from a waist belt beneath my kilt, the slight bulge produced was covered adequately by the sporran hung in its traditional place, at the centre front of the kilt.

Having practiced this method of concealment for several days in the immediate environs of my rooms in Aldwych, I ventured forth into the world for the odd social engagement to see what the problems might be if the period of use need be extended.

I was on one occasion required to spend a cold afternoon in Hyde Park listening to the band; my companion at the time, a wealthy lady of my acquaintance wrapped in a voluminous fur coat found no problem with the breeze which playfully froze my ankles. I am happy to say that the close proximity of the furry couple, to the nexus of my body maintained my central heating admirably, to the point of sheer comfort for the entire afternoon.

As the day approached for the acid test, my bags packed for the excursion to the Baltic State of Lithuania, a historic occasion that I felt it incumbent upon me to record if not for posterity, at least for any family with which fate may in future bless me. I arranged for a discreet photographer to attend me at my rooms to photograph the entire arrangement, suitably masked of course. He was known to me and sworn to secrecy; he delivered plates and photographs to me personally prior to my leaving the country. Thus properly prepared the adventure began.

The train to Dover was no trouble, when one has wealth, as have I, difficult things are simplified. I secured a First Class carriage to myself, and thus could relieve myself and the haggises from the constricted circumstances for an hour or so. The passage through customs gave rise to an amusing incident though I confess to not really understanding the full implication of the comment that caused amused chuckles and glances of considerable respect from the examining officer.

It was the habit in those times of particular emphasis on smuggling to produce a floor mounted mirror, to ensure there was nothing untoward beneath the skirts of suspect ladies. This was placed in a separate room and operated with decorum by women of the service. In my case since I was attired in my kilt, special arrangement was made for me to pass that way, in the absence of any ladies of course. I confess this was a circumstance that I had not anticipated and it was with some trepidation that I permitted myself to be thus surveyed.

The Officer charged with the examination of my nether regions may have been surprised to discover that I was a true Scot, but his comment at discovering my two furry friends nestling neatly netted between my legs were couched in respectful tones, his colleague who joined him to see, was the one that remarked that the story about the prowess of the Scots had not been exaggerated, this was the comment I did not understand, and I still don't understand why they did not disclose my secret at that point, sufficient to say I somehow managed to pass the first hurdle with flying colours.

On the ferry across the Channel still accompanied by my breeding pair I sat down to a passable luncheon in the first Class lounge. The remainder of the journey to Paris was conducted in strict privacy with all three of us able to relax and enjoy the peace of my private compartment.

I broke the journey at Paris, a favourite city of mine and I enjoyed the privacy of an apartment loaned by a friend of many years' acquaintance. I dined and wined for three days, relaxing in anticipation of the arduous journey to Warsaw and then to Vilnius. I had been made aware of the stringent rules covering the transit of wild animals through Europe and I was not too confident at evading the regulations as easily as I had on departing England.

Here I must digress a little because an event occurred that every adventurer anticipates, nay hopes for but seldom in reality happens. I encountered a lady. It sounds so simple, so trite even, but there was no suggestion of planning or entrapment, it just happened.

One minute I was there, a wealthy bachelor, delivering haggis to Lithuania, the next I was captivated by a pair of mischievous blue eyes. There was something familiar about the face surrounding the eyes, I had seen her before, but where? How could I forget such an enchanting creature, the soft blond hair waved, framing the heart shaped face, dear lips aching to be kissed.

How could I ever have forgotten such a delightful person? My puzzle was solved by the lady herself, who with little hesitation crossed the room and kissed me on both cheeks in the continental fashion, to my surprise she blushed, and admitted that she had wanted to do that ever since she had first seen me at Ascot when in attendance upon her mother, Lady Mainwaring.

Stars burst, I remember the little girl, perhaps fifteen, could it have been only three years ago, in her first grown up gown, even then a pretty girl fetching things for her mother as she sat and conversed with my mother. How she had blossomed, I was enthralled, and I lost no time in making all the enquiries one makes on these occasions. She was travelling to Warsaw, for an occasion, the ballet Kirov was performing; from there she had no plans, her Aunt was travelling with her and she was on the same train that I had booked, or rather planned to book for tomorrow. I excused myself but made arrangement to meet that evening to dine at her Hotel; and tomorrow on the train for the journey to Warsaw. It was fortunate that I was able to obtain a compartment for the onward journey, though I was still worried about the cross border hazards of entering Poland.

The evening was a success; the dining room of the George V was famous for its cuisine. The Aunt, when she realised I was an old acquaintance, and friend of the family, felt able to leave us after the sweet course, giving me time to talk and answer Mary's many questions. She was delighted to hear of my reason for the journey and vowed she would help me smuggle the Haggis over the Polish Border.

I had anticipated using the same method used for the British Customs, Mary quickly warned against it. Here, they apparently are much stricter with men suspects, though ladies are treated with respect and if of noble name, untouchable. She therefore would transport my little friends across the border on her own person. She would brook no argument on the point and thus it was arranged. We agreed to meet on the train to arrange the final details.

I was on air, I was in love, my fate had been sealed the moment we first met three years ago. As soon as Auntie had gone to bed she confided that her mind had been made up on the day she met me at Ascot. Whilst normally I would have been appalled by the candour of a young woman in these circumstances, with Mary I could find no fault. I myself admitted that her feelings were matched by my own. My only worry was whether her mother Lady Mainwaring, would accept me as a prospective son in law. I have been re-assured that Lady Mainwaring has known for some time that I was chosen; her ladyship and my mother had been resigned to the match for the last two years, I being the man involved was not required to know.

We traversed the Polish border without incident. Using the method I had devised for myself, having borrowed the belt, suitably shortened for her tiny waist, my beloved performed as

promised and my two little haggis showed no sign of the ordeal undergone.

Warsaw was full of chocolate soldiers and beautiful women; I was quite put out at the gallantry being shown to my love on all sides and upon all occasions. There was little I could do but be polite and secretly glory in her beauty and in the fact that I was the object of Mary's affections, despite the posing and posturing of the glitterati. I attended the ballet with my lady and then sadly decided I must go on and complete my self-appointed task of delivering my passengers to Lithuania.

What I did not foresee was the determination of my lady. There was no way at all I would be permitted to attempt the crossing without her participation. I had a plan in mind that entailed my going to the port of Danzig, on the Baltic coast. I had purchased a length of netting that I intended to attach to my two little furry balls, whereupon I would represent it as a net for fishing for the tiny 'filings', little slivers of fish smaller even than minnows, but regarded as a great delicacy. The floats, my haggis, would allow the net to drop like a curtain between them to snare the filings as they passed down stream.

Auntie soon scotched that little ploy. Of a much more practical mind, she said that the customs would have me for breakfast; I was being too clever for my own good. Her plan was of a much simpler nature. Whilst my love had abandoned the bustle, in favour of the more flattering modern mode, Auntie still carried out the fashion in honour of the Queen, having met my two little friends she had decided that there would be little difficulty in concealing them within her bustle, and thus without ado transporting them on this the final stage of their journey to Lithuania. The ploy worked as she had anticipated, I once more had to admire the surprising practicality of the female sex and be grateful that it was being put into effect on my behalf.

Once in Vilnius I contacted my Lithuanian acquaintance who immediately offered us all the hospitality of his grand town house. The moment of my disclosure of the true reason for the journey was classic. The production of the pair of haggis brought tears to his eyes. There would be no trouble finding a place for them to live and breed. Though unexpected there was a corner of the garden of this very house eminently suitable for their habitat. It was a disused aviary covering a large area of the immediate garden, some three acres or so, the haggis were thus delivered into the hands of his head gardener for introduction to their new home. His joy was a pleasure to witness. His attempts to reward me were of course rejected however tactfully as I explained the adventure of transporting the little creatures was my reward, to say nothing of the consequent meeting with my lady.

We spent a pleasant week in the historic Hanseatic City before we finally left to return home. The prospect of the formal engagement and the possible publication of the story of my epic

journey added a heady fillip to the prospect of the eventual homecoming.

It was not until after we had traversed Poland once more and we crossed the border into France that Auntie told me quietly that when she prepared the haggis for their sojourn in her bustle she had observed that they were both male. Such a possibility was not one I could ever have contemplated so you will understand how shocked I was at this disclosure. The more worldly aunt was quietly amused at my innocence demonstrated by my acceptance without closer examination of the specimens obtained. How easily diverted was I by the obvious affection of one for the other.

So sadly they are still unable to grow Haggis in Lithuania.

