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Let Them Eat . . . Um, What?

Gold-wrapped risotto, calf's tongue and caviar: one artist's gastronomic take on decadence.

By [Adam Fisher](#)

Published May 6, 2006



(Photo: Hans Gissingner)

Paul Renner has quite a history dishing out unusual sustenance. He spent a decade as an assistant to Hermann Nitsch, one of the more controversial Austrian artists of the sixties and seventies, well known (infamous, really) for his Dionysian “actions” in which people would bathe naked in the entrails of a freshly slaughtered lamb or pig. In the decades since, Renner has gone on to become an artist in his own right: a painter as well as a practitioner of that peculiar hybrid medium called food art. “I am interested in those historical moments when the culture becomes so refined that it falls back into itself,” says Renner. “Decadence.”

Which, of course, is what's brought him to New York. Gallerist Leo Koenig invited Renner to host a six-day feast called *Hardcore Diner*, a Chelsea edition of the dinner parties–cum–happenings Renner staged in the *Kunsthallen* of Austria and Germany. The timing couldn't be better. In this city, where haute cuisine long ago attained the status of high art but where food-and-restaurant mania has also lately become supersized (Buddakan comes to mind), Renner's art serves as a wild send-up of foodie culture: It's tongue-in-cheek-in-entrails.

“It wouldn't work in a restaurant rented for the occasion,” explains Koenig. “By bringing food into the gallery, it becomes art.” Like a grand opera, Renner's art subsumes all others: His dinners are part gastronomic experiment, part sculpture, part oil painting, and total theater.

The bacchanal runs through May 11, and for \$100, guests can have a seat at the table for one of the five-course meals Renner has prepared himself. Each night has its own theme. *Gastrointestinalatlas: A Journey to the Interior and Impossible Bodies: Hermaphrodites & Stuffed Figures* were the first offerings. But gourmands can look forward to Monday's *Fertile Fat Breasts: Abundance and Excess*, which features calf's tongue with wasabi caviar served on a bed of blossoms (“an ode to cunnilingus,” says Renner) and a centerpiece—doubling as the dessert course—consisting of twelve chocolate cakes, 24 glazed doughnuts, chocolate Twizzlers, Boston cream pie, and various bonbons dumped in a heap in the middle of the banquet table. The evening will also include a striptease by eclysiast Ruby Valentine.

Tuesday brings *In Cold Blood: Henkersmahlzeit*, a marrow-and-gore-themed feast: Dessert will be a chocolate birthday cake with seven candles—Texas murderer Miguel Richardson's last meal before he was put down by lethal injection on June 26, 2001. Wednesday's menu, *The Golden Ass: Transformation & Alchemy*, features a squid-ink risotto shrouded with gold leaf. (Like all the dishes, it's actually quite tasty.) And on the final night, *Decayed Gotham Honey Party: Perfume & Disinfectant*, in the ultimate act of decadence, all the china, cutlery, and stemware will be unceremoniously thrown in a Dumpster.

Renner and Koenig first ate together 25 years ago, when Koenig was a tyke in Munich and Renner his neighbor. Leo's mom, Ilka, a publisher, wasn't much for the kitchen, and his father, Kasper, a powerful curator, was living in Cologne. "There was never any food in the house," says Koenig, "so Paul would often cook me his specialty, pigs in a blanket, for dinner." Renner learned how to cook at the knee of his grandmother, the chef to Crown Prince Wilhelm, but it was only later that he became interested in the intersection of food and art.

In 1998, he set out to organize a conference on the subject in his hometown of Bregenz, Austria. Ferran Adrià—the Spanish deconstructionist chef who invented those now-ubiquitous food foams—agreed to participate. So did Daniel Spoerri, the renowned Romanian food artist (who once ran a restaurant where they cooked up dead animals from the local zoo), and Oswald Wiener, the Viennese artist-philosopher-anarchist. But the real coup was getting an RSVP from Medlar Lucan and Durian Gray, the authors of Renner's bible, *The Decadent Cookbook*, a collection of historically dubious recipes from the kitchens of Caligula and the Marquis de Sade.

"I tried to track down Lucan and Gray for months. I was even going to make a trip to the site of their former restaurant, the Decadent, in Edinburgh," recalls Renner. "Before I did, I spoke to the book's editors, Jerome Fletcher and Alex Martin." They made the trip to Bregenz instead, saying they had a "special treat." It turns out that Fletcher and Martin were in fact Lucan and Gray. The joke was on Renner. (Not surprising, since Martin used to be a writer for *Monty Python*.) Not only was the restaurant a fiction, but Renner was likely the first to attempt many of their depraved recipes: rat in a red-wine-and-shallot sauce, deviled bones and black pudding, stuffed sow's womb, etc.

Invitations were sent to a select group of both the fabulous and the homeless.

The three became fast friends and decided to establish the Hell Fire Dining Club to enact their gastronomic fantasies as performance art. The first public meeting of the club ("Actually, it's a pseudo-club," says Renner. "No one who is a member knows they are a member") was held for seventeen consecutive nights at the *Kunsthalle's* project space in Vienna in 2004. No expense was spared. The club boasted that queen of England's "wood tailor" (their designation for Her Majesty's Engraver) printed the menu on a seventeenth-century letterpress. Invitations were sent to a select group of both the fabulous and the homeless.



Artist-chef Paul Renner, caught between his painting and some of his dinner-art.

(Photo: Hans Gissingner)

The New York event is no less lavish. At Koenig's gallery, the tables, which seat 40, are Renner sculptures, built up from layers of black asphalt, gold leaf, and seashells. The candelabra are fashioned from dried herring dipped in bronze. The chandelier is based on Duchamp's Readymade *Egouttoir*. (Renner's version uses empty longnecks.) In the corner is a baby grand filled with ice, keeping the champagne chilled. During the course of the evening, the ice is meant to melt through the piano strings and flood the gallery. But perhaps the most over-the-top detail is the seaweed-covered walls. Four hundred pounds of dried nori can have an oddly gothic effect. "I emptied Chinatown," Renner says. "The shopkeepers all know me now—when I come by, they wave me away."

In some ways, Renner's "decadence" could be taken as a double-dig: at luxe restaurateuring but also at the raw-food faddists and health nuts who forsake his mode of cooking—rather heavy on the fats, sugars, and spirits. Koenig, however, disagrees: "It isn't about food. The food is just a vehicle to get people to interact." Amid all the extravagance, "there's a sincerity there, which is sometimes missing in New York. You become a part of it. The guests make the work complete. That's the art."

Fisher, Adam, "Let Them Eat...Um, What?" New York Magazine, May 6, 2006