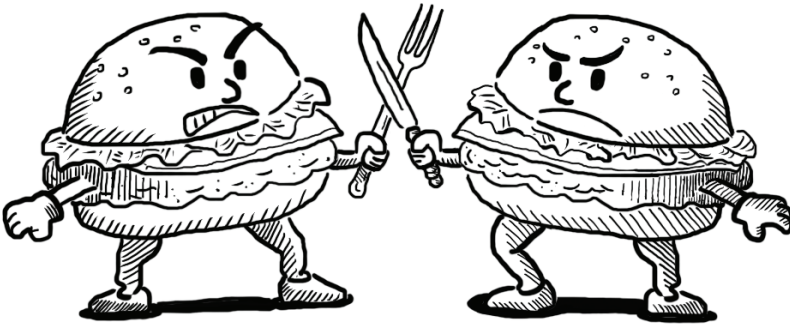


# THE EXPIALIDOCIOUS BURGER



Joanna Johnson had not expected much from her meeting with Patrick Green, CEO of Inkredible Foods, as she stepped into his office in Little Rock, Arkansas. When she greeted him, “Good morning”, he snapped back, “What’s so good about it?”

Used to Patrick’s moods, Joanna ignored his retort and headed to the massive mahogany meeting table. She lowered herself into an ergonomic black mesh chair, carefully arranged the sales charts before her, and cast a worried glance at Patrick as she waited for the meeting to begin.

She was worried, not so much for herself. She could handle the dip in sales numbers, the delays in product launches, and even Patrick’s notorious temper. After all, she had won the “Best at Standing Up to Patrick Green” award at the satirical Truly Inkredible Awards, held on the sidelines of the company’s annual dinner and dance.

No, she was worried about Patrick. *He’s going to have a heart attack at this rate*, she thought as she watched him pace the room.

She was even more worried about Steven Hawk, Inkredible’s Chief Scientist. A meek and mild-mannered man, he was known as “Steven the Dove”. Today, in Patrick’s tense and intense state, the Dove might get mauled.

Patrick had instituted these monthly update meetings with Steven and her ever since Rojak, a business rival, entered the US market six months ago.

“Where’s that dork of a scientist?” Patrick scowled as he dropped into the seat across from Joanna.

“Steve’s on his way. I passed by the lab – he’s probably busy analysing the ingredients of The Expialidocious Burger for you.”

“When are you all going to counter that unpronounceable Singaporean concoction? I’m paying you to boost our sales and

that propeller-head to outdo Rojak's meatless patty. I won't be upstaged by a newbie. If you can't deliver, you're all dead meat."

Joanna nodded, indicating she heard him, not that she agreed with him. Patrick tended to exaggerate when he was in a foul mood, but she understood his frustration. Sales of Inkredible's alternative meat products had plummeted over the past two months, as Rojak's meatless offerings dominated the market.

"We should be able to beat an Asian upstart on our home turf easily. America is the home of the burger! How are we losing to a newcomer with no real strategy?" Patrick rumbled.

"Why do you think Rojak has no strategy?"

"Do you even know what 'rojak' means?"

"Isn't it a Malay word for a salad dish popular in parts of Asia? I must say the name fits a plant-based food company."

"More than that! 'Rojak' is also slang for a messy, random way of doing things," Patrick sneered. "That's how the company operates too – just mix ingredients and see what sticks. That's not strategy. That's rojak!"

"I thought they had a clear strategy. They were focused on plant-based versions of Asian foods. They produced Mock Satay, Mock Shark's Fin, Mock Shrimp Dumplings. I'm not mocking them, but honestly, I can't imagine why anyone would want to eat mock pig intestines or chicken liver?"

"I've tried those Rojak products, Patrick."

Seeing the questioning arch of Patrick's eyebrow, Joanna added, "I had to! I'm Head of Sales and Marketing. I need to know our competition. You should try them, too."

Patrick's incredulous look hardened into a glare.

"Fine, you don't have to," she sighed.

"You're a market of one," Patrick said, thrusting his square jaws forward. "There's no demand for that nonsense here in the

US, Europe or anywhere else – except Asia. If they'd stayed in their lane, we'd be fine. But because they lack strategic thinking, they've created a product that they themselves can't even define. So, they slapped a ridiculous name on it, put it on our beloved burger, and launched it here, in our stronghold.”

“We'll fight them, Patrick. I'm already in talks with McDonald's for an 'Inkredibly Happy Meal.' I'm also re-launching our top meatless products – Inkredible Ham Sandwich 5.0 and Inkredible Steak 3.0.”

“What we need is a Steven Hawk 2.0! That wastrel isn't just late for meetings; he hasn't found the secret to Rojak's patty.”

“Patrick,” Joanna said, her tone soothing and admonishing, “Give Steve a break. He and his team are already working in overdrive on those revamped products.”

Joanna decided to shift gears and steer the conversation away from Steve's lateness. “Let's put the sales in perspective. Plant-based meat substitutes are less than five percent of our total revenue. Thanks to your acquisitions, our other segments are thriving. Even if we lose some ground to Rojak, the impact on our overall sales and profitability will be minimal.”

“You don't get it, do you?” Patrick's knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of the table. “We're the market leader in meat alternatives. We can't cede this space. It's what Inkredible Foods is built on. We can't let a Wong-come-lately outdo us. Damn it, Rojak just became a unicorn with its latest funding.”

“Patrick, Rojak's a five-year-old startup. Its valuation might not hold. We're an established publicly-traded company. We're worth 50 times more.”

Patrick ignored her. “Do you know they invited that young punk from Rojak to be the keynote speaker at the World Food Congress next week?”

*So, maybe that's what it all boils down to – two young CEOs jostling to make their mark on the global stage.*

Patrick Green, 41, had inherited Inkredible Foods from his father, Ethan Green, the visionary who had built the company around plant-based meat and later, cultured meat from in-vitro animal cells. While Ethan's passion had driven the company's early innovations, Patrick focused solely on success – cold, calculated and cleansed of ideals. He thrived on the cut and thrust of business.

When Patrick took the reins, he capitalised on the company's soaring valuations, using them to acquire and integrate mainstream food companies. Inkredible Foods, now among the world's top 10 food conglomerates, was an empire. Rojak, the startup helmed by Wong Ming Wei, had a long way to go before it could even dream of such a scale.

But the World Food Congress was a different battlefield. Known as the “Davos” of food, it was where industry giants mingled, deals were struck, and reputations were forged. When the President of the Culinary Institute of America fell ill at the last minute, the organisers, caught up in the buzz surrounding Rojak, invited Wong to deliver the keynote address.

*I suppose Patrick feels he should have been asked to deliver the keynote.*

“You know how it is with hype,” Joanna said, her voice comforting but assertive. “It fades. Fads like The Expialidocious Burger will come and go. Once the buzz dies down, we'll be back on top. Steve will create something better, and then we'll launch the Inkredible Burger 4.0.”

Just then, Steven Hawk burst into the room, frazzled, his thick glasses perched haphazardly on his nose. Fashion had never been Steven's concern, and it showed. Joanna remembered how much

more at ease he seemed in his white lab coat. Now, he had thrown on a worn-out jacket over a crumpled dark blue shirt, with his polka-dot tie hanging askew. The ensemble clashed terribly with his grey trousers and brown canvas sneakers.

Joanna had always found Steven's unpretentiousness a breath of fresh air in the harsh glare of the corporate world. He was undeniably brilliant but never flaunted his genius. Instead, he took pains to explain his theories to anyone willing to listen – though his explanations were often long-winded and could leave listeners bewildered. He also had a habit of stuttering when he got excited or nervous, particularly around Patrick.

“Oh look, here's the devil himself. You're at least 20 minutes late, Steven,” Patrick bellowed. “You'd better have good news for me.”

“I-I'm not sure if t-t-the news is good, sir, but I thought you should know as soon as possible. My team is working t-t-to confirm the hypothesis.”

“What is it then? Quickly,” Patrick said, glancing impatiently at his watch.

“We-well, as you know, sir, we reverse engineer t-t-to create our meat substitutes. We first break down t-t-the meat into the micro-ingredients that give it its t-t-taste, t-t-texture, colour, smell and nutrition. Then, we find the plant-based extracts to substitute for t-them. For example, with Inkredible Steak, we—”

*Oh no, Patrick will explode if Steven's going into an exposition about the secret of producing plant-based substitutes.* Joanna had heard it all before. While she found Steven's passion endearing, now was not the time to test Patrick's patience.

Before Joanna could intervene, Patrick cut Steven off, towering over him. “Steven! I already know all this. Just cut to the chase?”

“Ye-yes, sir,” Steven stammered, shrinking under Patrick’s glare. He glanced nervously at his boss and continued, “Si-since Rojak didn’t specify which meat their burger was based on, we started by isolating t-t-the various micro-elements of its patty. It took some time. T-t-then we tried to identify which plant or plant extract t-t-they might have used—”

Patrick was now nearly shouting. “I said ‘quickly’ and ‘cut to the chase’. Which part did you not understand?”

Joanna’s chest tightened as she noticed Steven’s shoulders hunch under Patrick’s glare. “Steve, Steve...” she interjected, stepping forward to place a steadying hand on his shoulder. “Patrick’s asking for the bottom line. What did you and your team find?”

Steven hesitated, his voice barely above a whisper. “T-t-the Expialidocious Burger, Joanna... It’s a plant-based substitute for – human flesh.”



Howard Harper shifted uneasily on the maroon leather sofa in a cosy meeting room at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington, DC, anxiously watching the clock. His guest was late.

*How did I end up here?* he wondered, reflecting on the unlikely path that had brought him to this moment. Once a respected medical doctor and Professor of Medicine and Health Policy at Duke University, Howard had quickly risen to prominence, celebrated for his work in bringing health initiatives to the attention of public officials. After more than 30 years in academia, his appointment as US Commissioner of Food and Drugs at 65 seemed like a fitting capstone to his career. As the head of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), he had expected a

challenging role but had not anticipated being thrown into the middle of a corporate war.

Less than six months into the job, Howard was already reeling. The petty politics of academia seemed trivial compared to the brutal corporate machinations he now faced. The endless bureaucracy and legal complexities of federal and state legislation were daunting enough, but the real battle was with industry players who played for keeps.

Now, he was caught between two feuding CEOs, both young enough to be his sons. His medical and academic experience had not prepared him for the ruthless commercial conflicts, riddled with social and cultural landmines. He regretted not pursuing more practical experience in mediation – a skill that would certainly have been invaluable now.

The week had been a whirlwind since Patrick Green, CEO of Inkredible Foods, had made that explosive phone call. Plant-based meat and lab-grown alternatives were supposed to spare animals from slaughter and feed humanity more ethically. But now, this noble goal was mired in a vicious rivalry and allegations made by Inkredible Foods, the US food giant, against Rojak, a rising Singaporean startup.

“What’re you going to do about it?” Patrick had demanded, after revealing the shocking results of Inkredible’s investigation into Rojak’s bestseller, *The Expialidocious Burger*. “If you don’t act, I will.”

Patrick had not spelt out his threats, and Howard had not asked. As Commissioner, he could not afford to be seen to bend to corporate pressure. Yet, he knew Patrick was right – any hint that *The Expialidocious Burger* mimicked the taste of human flesh would be a catastrophe, not just for his career, but for the industry and the public at large.



It had taken all of Howard's diplomacy to calm the man down, promising to look into the matter without committing to a course of action. The truth was, he had no idea what he would do.

"Commissioner, Mr Wong is here," his personal assistant interrupted, ushering in Wong Ming Wei, CEO of Rojak. Howard took in Wong's appearance – spiky hair, bright smile, thin and lanky build. He looked just like his photos. The unbuttoned grey flannel jacket over an olive green round-neck T-shirt and designer jeans radiated effortless style and cool confidence. *I shouldn't have worn a tie.*

Howard had spent the past few days reading everything he could find about Wong, especially the articles written after the launch of The Expialidocious Burger.

Wong's story was compelling. Abandoned by his father at four and left to his own devices by a struggling mother, he had grown up on the edge. Detention centres and halfway houses were a large part of his youth until his mother remarried when he was 15. His stepfather, whom he idolised, provided the guidance and stability Wong had never known. With newfound confidence, Wong focused on his studies and excelled, eventually topping his class.

After completing National Service, Wong attended law school and quickly ascended the ranks at Anandan & Fernando LLP, one of Singapore's top criminal law firms. His rise was meteoric. He was made a partner in record time. But everything changed when he embraced Buddhism and became a vegetarian at 32.

Wong left the legal world to found Rojak, focusing on vegetarian cuisine. The company initially concentrated on Asian dishes, but this year, it made headlines with its meatless patties. Wong's media portrayal as one of Singapore's most eligible

bachelors was not just due to his newfound wealth, but also his good looks and charisma.

Conscious of the greying hair around his temples, Howard stood and straightened his tie before extending his hand. “Welcome to DC, Mr Wong. Thank you for meeting me.”

“It’s my honour, Commissioner. Please call me Ming. Thank you for arranging this meeting at the World Food Congress hotel.”

“Not at all. Call me Howard,” he replied, gesturing for Ming to take a seat.

Ming sat comfortably on the sofa, feet planted firmly on the thick carpet. He leaned forward, right elbow resting on the armrest, a hint of a colourful dragon tattoo peeking out from under his jacket sleeve, a reminder of his wild youth.

Howard decided to ease into the conversation. “I wanted to meet you, Ming, because of – let me see if I get this right – The Expialidocious Burger?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Congratulations, Ming. I understand consumers are going wild over it. Tell me, how did you develop this unique taste?”

“Frankly, we’re as surprised as anyone, Howard. It wasn’t part of any grand plan. The discovery, the name, the marketing – it all came together through what you might call ‘serendipity’.”

“You’re being modest, Ming. Good fortune is often enabled by hard work.”

“True, we work hard, but luck played a big role too. We put all our lab innovations through several layers of taste tests, rated on our five-point ‘Shiok’ Meter. It’s like the top half of the industry’s nine-point Hedonic Scale.”

Howard had already read about Rojak’s process. Ming’s words felt rehearsed, and Howard sensed a hint of smugness in his tone, but he let him continue.

“‘*Shiok*’ is Malay for ‘highly pleasurable’. The mix that became The Expialidocious Burger’s patty blew everyone away. It consistently scored at the top of our Shiok Meter – ‘Wah Shiok’ and ‘Dam Shiok’. One of our lab guys insisted on eating it every day. The whole thing was so crazy that we decided to give it a crazy name, inspired by ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’ from *Mary Poppins*.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about that.”

“And the tagline – ‘Inexplicably Delicious’ – just popped out from the name. Because of that, we almost called it ‘The Inexpialidocious Burger’, but the word was already too long. Plus, we had to check with our legal team about copyright issues and ensure we wouldn’t be accused of cultural appropriation. Who knew a name could involve so much work? Sometimes, it makes you wonder...”

“Great story, Ming. But the question is: what meat does The Expialidocious Burger actually replicate?”

“We don’t know, Howard.”

*It doesn’t ring true. How could he not know? That is the basis of a meat substitute – to substitute for a specific meat.*

Howard stayed silent, giving Ming the space – and the rope – to explain.

“Does it matter?” Ming asked. “People love the taste. It’s all plant-based – we can attest to that. And all our ingredients are listed on the food label, as required by your American rules and regulations.”

That, of course, was not entirely accurate. While food manufacturers had to list ingredients by predominance, some could be lumped together as “flavours”, “spices” or “artificial flavouring” without detailed disclosure. That was how companies like Coca-Cola and KFC kept their “secret” recipes. The FDA

could demand more detailed filings on ingredients and processes for Rojak, but focusing on that would be a distraction now. Howard decided to stick to his main line of questioning, watching Ming closely.

“The key point, Ming, is that you’re selling the patty as a meat substitute. So, what meat does it substitute?”

“Well, I suppose you could say it’s a blend. Like combining beef, pork and chicken into one patty. There’s no single meat we can point to, Howard.”

*Was he trying to pull a fast one here?*

“So, you’re saying it’s a plant-based substitute for a mix of beef, pork and chicken?” Howard asked.

“I can’t say for sure,” Ming replied, his tone matter-of-fact. “Our approach is to forward engineer and experiment with different mixes of plant-based ingredients, not to work backwards from specific meats like some of our competitors. Once we find a taste that works, we try to match it to a meat it resembles most and market it accordingly. But with this particular creation, we couldn’t figure it out. One of our marketing folks suggested we embrace the craziness and give it a fun, nonsense name instead of claiming it’s based on any specific meat. So, the truth is, we don’t really know.”

Ming delivered his explanation with unwavering eye contact, his expression unreadable. Howard decided it was time to cut to the chase. “There are people who claim they do know.”

“Know what?”

“Know what meat it substitutes.”

Ming’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And what meat is that?”

“Human flesh.”

A heavy silence filled the room. Howard scrutinised Ming’s face, looking for any flicker of recognition, any sign that he

might have suspected the truth. But Ming’s expression remained inscrutable. His brow furrowed as he seemed to process Howard’s words and searched for an answer. *It looks like he genuinely had not heard or even thought of the possibility that it could be human meat.*

Finally, Ming spoke, his voice laced with disbelief. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“No, I’m not. I’ve been reliably informed that The Expialidocious Burger is a substitute for human meat.”

“By whom?” Ming’s tone sharpened.

“Does it matter?”

“How could anyone possibly know? The only way to tell is by tasting human flesh, and that would mean killing someone to prove it.”

“Can you prove that your product isn’t a substitute for human meat?”

Ming’s eyes flashed with irritation. “Isn’t it the law in this country that you’re innocent until proven guilty? Can you prove that it is human meat?”

“I’m not accusing you of anything, Ming. I’m saying it can’t be proven – or disproven – that the patty in The Expialidocious Burger is a plant-based substitute for human flesh.”

Ming’s irritation grew palpable. “So, it’s a baseless accusation that won’t hold up in any court of law.”

*Old habits die hard; the lawyer in him is coming out.*

“It’s not the court of law that concerns me, Ming. It’s the court of public opinion. The mere suggestion that it could be human meat would send the media into a frenzy. The backlash would be severe – for both of us.”

“Then don’t mention it. Don’t put it out there.”

“It’s not up to me. The slightest whisper, and it would be impossible to contain the allegation.”

Howard decided to lay his cards on the table. “You should know that Inkredible Foods provided the information, suggesting your patty replicates the composition of human thigh flesh. They’ve threatened to leak their findings to the media.”

The room fell silent again, the tension thickening as the two men locked eyes.

Ming’s expression darkened, his smile morphing into a scowl that sent chills down Howard’s spine. *Would he actually lose his cool?*

“Trust me, I’ll sue Patrick Green and Inkredible Foods if they go public,” Ming said, his voice low and menacing. “This rivalry has gotten out of hand. If the FDA backs Inkredible’s claims, I’ll make sure the world’s media gets to know how US protectionism works to snuff out the little guy.”

*He’s really agitated now.*

Howard raised a hand, palm out, signalling for calm. “Son, we’re on the same side.”

“I’m not your son!” Ming shot back, bristling.

Howard quickly adjusted his tone. “I apologise, Ming. I meant it in a fatherly way. I would’ve been proud to have a son like you. My daughter is about your age – she left medicine to become an entrepreneur, too. I understand how you feel.”

Howard kept his voice calm, concealing his discomfort at Ming’s threats. “Let’s be clear, Ming. I’m not protecting Inkredible Foods or any US company. My job is to protect the food industry, and I’m trying to protect you. Imagine the backlash from this allegation – the ethical questions it would raise. As long as you can’t prove your burger isn’t a substitute for human meat, the fact that it tastes so good, like human flesh, will create a storm.”

Howard decided to tap into Ming's known commitment to corporate social responsibility and sustainability. "Look, Ming, I hear that you are passionate about moral capitalism and the need for corporations to focus on – what you call – 'values versus value'. Well, this matter goes beyond the economic value of your rising sales revenues and dives into the values that make us human – and humane. It's about the ethics of selling a plant-based substitute that's marketed as tasting like human meat. Not just that it tastes like human flesh, but that it tastes *better* than any other meat.

"This is about the morality of encouraging a leaning towards cannibalism. I need not tell you that cannibalism could eventually lead to a fate worse than climate change – the very existence of the human race. Why, some scientists believe that cannibalism may have caused the extinction of the Neanderthals, for example. Is that the path you want us to take, Ming?"

Howard drew in a sharp breath of air when he finished speaking. He felt like he had just delivered a convocation address. But it was not a scripted speech. His words had come out unplanned, driven by the thoughts that had troubled him for days since Patrick Green's revelation.

Another pause. Howard noticed that Ming shifted in his seat for the first time, just very slightly and uncomfortably.

"What do you suggest I do?" Ming asked quietly.

*He's thinking through his options but doesn't want to show his hand.*

Howard sensed progress but knew it was not time to press for concessions. "Before I suggest anything, let me tell you what the FDA intends to do. This issue isn't just about The Expialidocious Burger. We're planning to introduce a new regulation requiring meat substitutes to specify what meat they're replacing."

Ming's eyebrow arched, a smirk tugging at his lips. "So we'll say our patty substitutes unicorn meat. Since unicorns are mythical, no one can prove us wrong."

"Nice try," Howard countered. "We did think about that. The regulation will also require proof that you're truly substituting the claimed meat. We'll need to compare the actual meat and your plant-based substitute, judged by an independent panel. Without that, you won't get FDA approval. Other countries will likely follow our lead."

Another long silence. Ming shifted in his seat again.

*He is less the confident, self-assured man who came into this room.*

"All right, Howard, you got me. I see your point. This talk of human meat is unhealthy – I don't want any of us to go there."

"Good. We'll take a few months to roll out the regulations. In the meantime, I'm asking you to halt all sales and marketing of The Expialidocious Burger until the regulations are in place."

Ming nearly jumped from his seat. "Why should I stop now? Can't I use the time before the regulations kick in to maximise sales?"

"Because Inkredible has made it clear they'll go public unless you stop immediately. You can use your World Food Congress speech tomorrow to announce it – make some excuses."

"This will devastate our investors. It will cripple us," Ming said, desperation seeping into his voice.

Ming paused, then looked up sharply. "Can I get your agreement that if I stop now, you'll expedite approval for our revamped products?"

"What revamped products?"

"We can tweak the ingredients of The Expialidocious Burger 2.0 to taste like a mix of meats – chicken, beef, pork, whatever.



It'll take time because it means going back to the drawing board. But we've got two other products nearly ready: The Supercali Hotdog and The Fragilistic Omelette."

Ming had spoken in a slow and measured manner, thinking as he spoke. But his pace picked up as he became visibly excited sharing the plans for his new products. "The Hotdog's tagline is 'Doggone, It's Hot' – very American. And the Omelette's is, 'So Screamingly Fragile, So Shiok.' We originally modelled it after the Chinese Fried Oyster Omelette, but it tastes even better, and I think we've found another meat to associate with it. If you expedite these two approvals, we can launch them and compensate for halting The Expialidocious Burger."

Howard weighed his options. *This kid's a sharp negotiator, after all.* But he realised he had no easy way of stopping Rojak immediately until the new regulations were in place.

"Okay, Ming, I can agree – as long as none of these products substitute human meat, or even hint at it."

"You have my word."

"And you have mine that we'll prioritise approval for these three products – your Burger 2.0, Omelette and Hotdog. But just those three. The rest go through the regular channels."

"Deal," Ming agreed. "I'll announce tomorrow that we're halting The Expialidocious Burger due to a shortage of key ingredients. I'll say we're coming back with Version 2.0 and launching these two new products."

"Fine by me."

Ming stood and shook Howard's hand firmly. "You're a fair man, Commissioner. You do your job very well. I'm sorry I accused you of protectionism earlier."

*The boy's now contrite for having been brash. Good, he's learning to respect his elders.*

“No harm done, Ming. We all say things we may not mean in the heat of the moment. Thank you for your understanding, too.”

Howard felt relieved that Ming was not the aggressive businessman some magazines had made him out to be. He reckoned he had secured the best outcome for the FDA and the industry. So pleased with himself, he could hardly wait to try Rojak’s new products.

“By the way, what meats are you substituting in your Hotdog and Omelette?” he asked as Ming reached the door.

Ming turned, hand on the door handle, and with a straight face said, “Dog meat for the Hotdog. Monkey brains for the Omelette. See you at the Congress tomorrow.”