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# Eating (Synthetic) Animals

By James McWilliams



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Recent history has witnessed the exciting politicization of meat. Scores of recent books and articles (not to mention [lively exchanges](#) on the Atlantic Food Channel) have raised the profile of meat production to a mainstream environmental cause, illuminating the hazards that industrial meat—which is 99 percent of the meat we eat—poses to our soil, air, and water. The ethical dimensions of eating meat have also started to make meaningful inroads into public consciousness. Now more than ever, everyday meat eaters are considering the moral implications of raising billions of animals for food that our bodies can easily do without. ("We don't need to eat it," Dr. Amy Lanou, senior nutrition scientist for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, says of meat.)

Reactions to these concerns vary. Some have bolted to the fringes—with one extreme cohort going vegan or vegetarian while a more defensive group (mostly people in the business of meat production) has dug in its heels around the troubling justification that eating meat is a guiltless act because humans have always done it (as if history should rationalize contemporary behavior!). The quiet majority has fallen between the extremes, weighing the prevailing arguments and, to one extent or another, approaching the meat counter with a little more humility, if not a dose of carnivorous agnosticism. No matter our stance on meat, chances are good that we're at least listening, thinking, and maybe even plotting a dietary change or two.

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But one issue to which concerned consumers have generally turned a tin ear is "in-vitro meat." Although the cost is currently prohibitive, the technology is widely available to produce meat from the

cultured cells of animals rather than the animals themselves. Also called "cultured meat" or "synthetic meat," this product, which supporters promise will have comparable taste to conventional meat, has enormous potential to confront the environmental and ethical concerns that so many agnostic carnivores find troubling. Speaking for the Humane Society of the United States, Paul Shapiro, senior director of the group's Factory Farming Campaign, explained in an e-mail that "in vitro meat has the potential to prevent an enormous amount of suffering ."

Anyone who cares about animals and the environment must acknowledge Shapiro's point. In so far as cultured meat would obviate the need to raise flesh for human consumption, it would arguably be the most pivotal development in 10,000 years of farming. An industry that currently generates substantial amounts of greenhouse gas (6 to 9 percent of U.S. totals, 18 to 51 percent globally), pollutes already endangered water supplies, consumes millions of acres of corn and soy (and of course the pesticides and fertilizers needed to grow them), uses the vast majority of antibiotics made, accounts for massive amounts of deforestation, and destroys riparian zones worldwide could be replaced by an industry with comparatively minimal environmental impact, zero dependence on agricultural chemicals or land, and, most critically, no need to kill a single animal in the quest to meet our insatiable demand for meat. Not one beast. It almost sounds too good to be true.

Unless, of course, you have an interest at stake. Agribusiness is hardly eager to see meat move from the feedlot to the laboratory, and it comes as no surprise that the National Cattlemen's Association has handled the idea of in vitro meat with all the finesse of a cattle prod. Interestingly enough, the meat industry is not alone. In one of the stranger cases of mortal enemies waking up as snug bedfellows, advocates of sustainable agriculture appear to agree with agribusiness that in vitro meat should be kept off the radar screen of our culinary future. Their reasons are revealing. And troubling.

Kate McMahon, who represents Friends of the Earth, complained to CNN that "At a time when hundreds of small-scale, sustainable farming operations are filing for bankruptcy every day, it is unethical to consider purchasing petri dish meat." Unethical! Slow Food USA is skeptical for reasons that defy easy summation, but here's president [Josh Viertel](#)'s take on "test-tube flesh": "The problems with cruelty to animals are born of that gap [between producer and consumer]. I see [test tube flesh] as a solution that just increases that gap ... This is a technology that's just going to give more to companies and create a larger distance between us."

Frankly, these responses boggle my noodle. Both McMahon and Viertel seem to forget that an integral aspect of animal cruelty is not just how an animal is treated while it's alive but also the inconvenient truth that—*no matter how they are raised*—the animals we eat ultimately succumb to a violent death, one that they are smart enough to anticipate, sentient enough to suffer through, and, were they given an option, wise enough to avoid. On some (philosophical?) level, the humanity of the treatment is compromised the moment the death blow lands—this is certainly "one of the problems with cruelty to animals." In fact, dare one interpret that gruesome moment as penultimate to anything else, consider the reaction of a man as cold-steeled and tough-minded as Anthony Bourdain who, after witnessing the slaughter of a six-month-old hand-fed pig, left this unforgettable response in [Kitchen Confidential](#):

For a guy who'd spent twenty-eight years serving dead animals and sneering at vegetarians, I was having an unseemly amount of trouble getting with the program. I had to suck it up. . . It took four strong men, experts at this sort of thing, to restrain the pig, then drag and wrestle him up onto his

side ... With the weight of two men pinning him down, and another holding his hind legs, the main man with the knife, gripping him by the head, leaned over and plunged the knife all the way into the beast's thorax, just above the heart. The pig went wild. The screaming penetrated the fillings in my teeth ... With an incredible shower of fresh blood, the pig fought mightily ... They finally managed to wrestle the poor beast back up onto the cart again, the guy with the mustache working the blade back and forth like a toilet plunger ...

Anyone who has seen anything remotely like this intuitively understands the truth of the matter: the pig does not go gently for the very basic reason that the pig does not want to go.

The fact that the harsh reality of animal death for billions of creatures does not immediately overwhelm concerns about the economic viability of several hundred small farms (McMahon's point), much less the emotional distance separating privileged consumers from their local farmers (Viertel), suggests that Friends of the Earth and Slow Food are just as removed from the reality of agriculture as anyone else. Contrary to what it may seem, what we're ultimately witnessing with the sustainable food movement's opposition to in vitro meat is not so much a warped moral calculus—Viertel, I know firsthand, is far too thoughtful and intelligent for such a flaw—but rather something much more prosaic: the protection of sacred turf.

Viertel's and McMahon's comments followed me around—nagged me, actually—for days after I read them. But then I realized something: the politics of meat is the politics of self interest—no matter what side of the debate one is on—and, as is always the case, everyone's interest is fiercely protected except that of the animals. Just as corn and soy are the bread and butter of Big Ag, the persistence of small, traditionally conceptualized farms practicing time honored agricultural techniques is the *sine qua non* of the sustainable food movement. Without these small family farms, and without animals being humanely raised to be slaughtered, the movement's turf would shrink. The knowledge that science and technology could have the potential to fundamentally redefine (and improve) the very agricultural tradition that so many organizations are designed to protect is knowledge we can hardly expect interested parties to evaluate in fair terms. My guess is that it probably terrifies them.

And I kind of feel their pain. But still: a pound of flesh sacrificed by a small cadre of sustainable animal farms would be an immeasurable gain for the billions unable to articulate their position on the matter of their own death. Anyway, I know how my fork would vote.

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