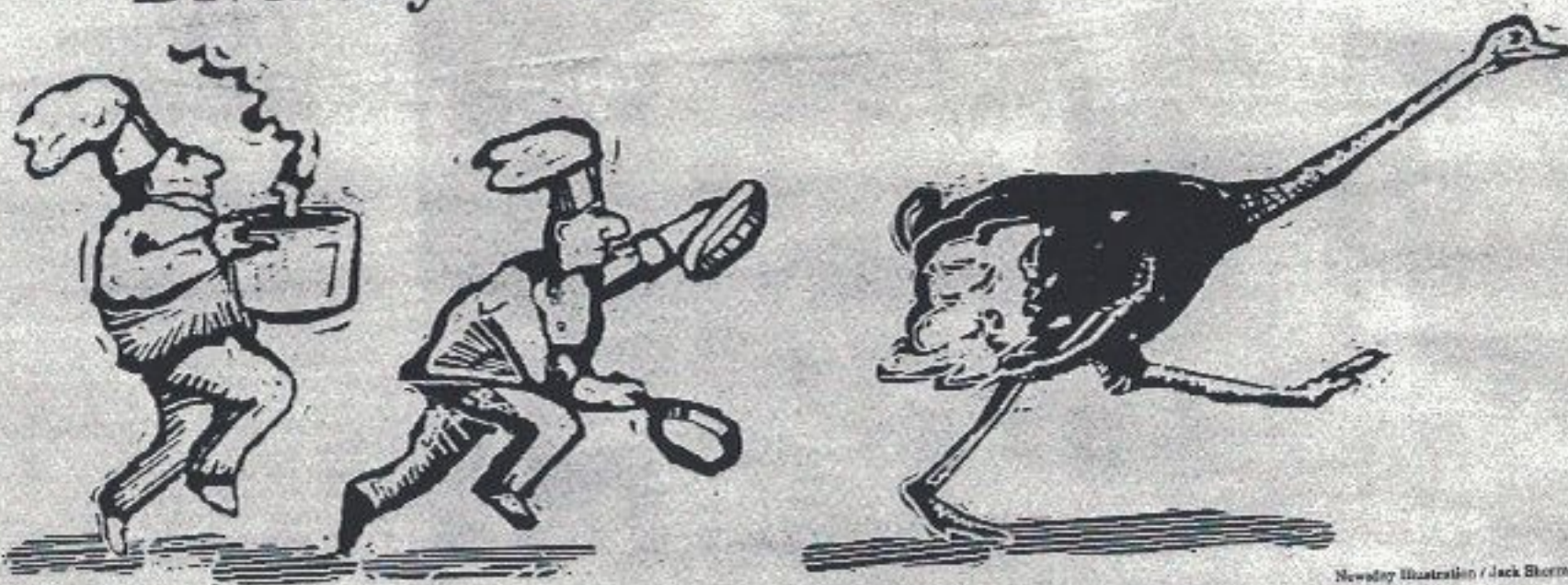


Diversity Comes to the Meats We Eat



Newspaper illustration / Jack Bierman

By John Feffer

America celebrates diversity, but you wouldn't know it by the meat we eat. Americans are surprisingly picky about what animals and cuts of animals grace our tables. We are fixated on the Big Three: beef, chicken and pork. True, our preferences are changing. Chicken overtook pig in 1996 and continues to make considerable headway against cow. But there are no serious competitors on the horizon. Seafood is way back in the pack. Lamb, which is hardly exotic, is consumed at 1/50th the rate of pork.

The list of animals off-limits to the American palate is quite long. Familiarity breeds indigestion, so we tend not to eat our pets. We are similarly reticent about eating our fellow primates. Carnivores are generally off the menu, perhaps because there is a subtle suggestion of cannibalism. Rodents have been fair game only at times of scarcity, and insects have not yet caught on despite the short-lived craze for chocolate-covered ants.

Even for the beasts we do eat, we're finicky about the parts we can stomach. Most organ meats are out, though exceptions are made according to ethnicity (chopped liver, chitlins) and region of the country (scrapple at Philadelphia diners, bull's testicles at Coors Field in Denver). The same holds true for recognizable features such as feet and heads. When we do eat animal organs, these "variety meats" tend to be rendered into forms so remote from their origins that they might have been whipped up in a laboratory.

This isn't simply a matter of personal choice. We eat what we are told to eat: by our parents, our supermarkets, our television, our meat lobbies, even our pocketbooks (the beef, pork and chicken industries can deliver cheaper products because of economies of scale). Apparently the recommendations of our doctors have fallen on deaf ears, for our taste for flesh is only growing. Last year, Americans ate nearly 200 pounds of boneless, trimmed meat per person, 10 percent more than in 1970. Just look at your backyard grill this summer and judge for yourself. The Big Three rule.

Twenty years from now, with any luck, the menu might look a great deal more varied. There will be ostrich burgers, goat barbecue, a nice sirloin of bison, perhaps something a little risqué like horse meat sausages. Pressures from both outside and within American society — economic, demographic and medical — are slowly beginning to pry open conservative American taste buds. And while we might feel that our high level of civility and sophistication are under attack, this is actually a good thing, for the sake of our

health, our foreign relations and our planet.

The thin edge of the wedge will likely be the health issue. The Big Three are a scary trio, and it's not just a question of fat and cholesterol. There are always concerns about chicken infected with salmonella or pork laced with trichinosis. Eric Schlosser's best-selling "Fast Food Nation" provides horrifying descriptions of kitchen sinks that chemical-laden raw beef has made dirtier than toilet bowls and hamburger patties so chock-full of toxins they should be banned as chemical weapons. In "My Year of Meats," Ruth Ozeki gives a thinly fictionalized account of the corporate selling and soiling of beef. Then there's "mad cow disease," whose memory-destroying properties turn the phrase "a forgettable meal" into a chilling reality.

Health concerns have certainly swelled the ranks of vegetarians, particularly among 20-somethings. In-veterate meat eaters, meanwhile, have seized on organic beef and free-range chickens as healthier alternatives. A smaller number of others have searched out more exotic alternatives from other traditions, such as ostrich (Africa) and bison (Native American).

It is difficult to know precisely how popular exotic meat has become, since the U.S. Department of Agriculture doesn't keep these statistics. The anecdotal evidence, though, is impressive. Since moving to the Internet, for instance, Seattle's Finest Exotic Meats has seen a dramatic increase in sales, from 20 percent in the first year to 90 percent increases from 1998 to 2000. According to owner Russell McCurdy, ostrich and buffalo enjoyed excellent press in the late 1990s because of their health benefits: Both have less than three-quarters the cholesterol, half the calories and one-ninth the fat of beef. Compared to the products of the corporate beef industry, the exotics are generally chemical-free and have more room to roam, so appear to be happier creatures. They're also more expensive — \$15 for a pound of kangaroo fillet, \$18 for a pound of buffalo steak — a serious impediment to going mass market.

But exotics are not just for rich folks. The burger chain Fuddruckers may have heralded a culinary revolution when it introduced ostrich on the menu a couple of years ago. While unlikely in the near term to seriously challenge the regular fare — it's about one-third more expensive — the ostrich burger accounts for 2 percent to 5 percent of sales, a remarkable figure given the iconic status of the traditional American hamburger. The Fuddrucker menu has no pictures to remind the customer of the source of the exotic new item. "It's better to let people use their own imagination," explains Director of Marketing Scott McCullough.

Soon to take up arms with Fuddruckers in this revolution is Ted's Montana Grill, a new chain restaurant that will feature bison burgers made at least in part from owner Ted Turner's 27,000 head of bison.

Since ostrich and bison don't have a high "yuck" quotient among Americans (unlike snake) and haven't been widely anthropomorphized (unlike kangaroo), they are probably the best candidates to become successful "crossover" meats.

Others will grow in popularity simply because the demographics of American society are changing. Goat, for instance, has become more popular not because of the availability of McGoat sandwiches or goat stew served at the local diner. Goat is widely eaten by the growing numbers of Caribbean, Mideastern, Eastern and Southeast Asian immigrants.

Globalization generally is making such alternatives more available. Much of the exotic meat market is home-grown at ostrich and buffalo farms scattered around the United States. But a good deal is imported — kangaroo from Australia, antelope from southern Africa, elk from New Zealand. Development agencies are encouraging countries to cater to this growing market. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, for instance, is supporting the farming of crocodile in India, ostrich in Namibia and deer in Papua New Guinea.

In the long run, greater contact with the world's foods has the potential to challenge some of our cultural prejudices. Food preferences and prohibitions, involving both the raw and the cooked, serve as fundamental markers of culture (guinea pigs are a specialty in less developed Andean countries but are rarely eaten in Argentina) and of class (pork medallions versus pig's feet). In the United States, it has become a measure of civilization to divorce meat as much as possible from its origins. It is as if we are ashamed of our carnivorous tendencies, and a calf's head or a whole suckling pig or dog soup reminds us of more primitive, less sublimated desires.

We turn up our noses at gourmet French preparations of horsemeat. Animal-rights activists rail against the eating of dog in Korea. Newspapers routinely publish articles on "those crazy Chinese" and their penchant for eating virtually everything that moves under its own power. But as we taste the ribs and put another hamburger on the grill, we should remember that our tastes are considered exotic, even repulsive by much of the world. Muslims and Jews think pork is unclean; Hindus treat cows as sacred.

Even as the Golden Arches span an increasing number of cities around the world, America fortunately is being transformed from within. In a globalized world, where hunger remains endemic and corporate meat production is both unhealthy and ecologically unsound — overgrazing causes soil erosion and the industry produces massive waste problems — the monopoly of the Big Three is a growing embarrassment. Less meat and different meat: Our diets need some serious diversification.

A changing world is changing American taste buds.



John Feffer, editor of "Living in Hope: People Challenging Globalization," is working on a book about food in Asia.