

SMALL FARMS, SAFER MEAT

Karin Winegar

"I am a great eater of beef,
and I believe that does harm to my wit."

Sir Andrew Aguecheek "Twelfth Night"
by William Shakspeare



Karin Winegar & friend
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The venison sausage my father has made up each winter after the deer hunt is deep red-brown, flecked with fat, nearly bursting its taut, oily skin. It arrives in white butcher paper tied with white string or masking tape, fresh from the village locker where local hunters take their deer carcasses to have them sliced into steaks, ground into burger, mashed and compressed into sausage . It is savory, salty and autumnal, and I have eaten a whole pound or more in a day, stacking it with cheddar cheese on crackers or just wolfing the oily disks.

I grew up in farm country, in a packing plant town that smelled of smoked bacon when the wind blew from the southeast. We ate meat with impunity and delight: ring summer sausage simmered in a skillet, hoops and wands of bologna, dull dun blocks of smeary braunschweigert, charcoal grilled steaks framed in charred hot gobbets of fat, thick country pork ribs simmered with apple rings, cinnamon and cream, pie crusts made from white blocks of fresh, cool lard in waxy paper boxes.

My grandparents raised hogs and cattle, chickens, geese, guinea fowl, goats and sheep. They always had their own pork, chicken and beef stacked in a spare freezer or two in the farmhouse cellar. When I came downstairs to a breakfast of a platter of fried eggs and bacon, I was invariably delighted and simultaneously troubled. I didn't need to get to know a pig or cow - Grandpa Winegar named a Holstein heifer calved on my birthday in my honor - in order to like it. So I was an uneasy omnivore, loving and craving pork tenderloin sandwiches at the drive in , steamed ground beef sandwiches at the Maid-Rite, hot dogs with pickle relish and mustard at picnics, and later, lamb chops and roasts coated in black pepper, rosemary and garlic at friend's dinner parties.

But I never felt right about it. For six years during college in the Viet Nam war era, I gave up meat. I was an ideologically ardent vegetarian, but my body was less willing. My dreams oozed cheeseburgers with onions and mustard so vivid I was never sure I hadn't sleep-walked to the nearest burger shack. My mother worried about protein deficiency, but I waved Frances Moore Lappe ("Diet for a Small Planet" - the vegetarian manifesto of the era) at her and went on living on yogurt, pasta and salads. Other than a granola gut - another legacy of the Sixties - I thrived.

Decades later, when I heard about bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease) I suspected it was bovine backlash, the just revenge of the big-eyed meek creatures riding cold and frightened in the red wooden stock trucks of my childhood and in now the silver double decker trucks to the packing plant where they are prodded bawling and trembling into the chutes toward the bolt gun, the knife, the leg chain. That another version, chronic wasting disease (CWD), is now turning up in deer and elk, seems gruesomely fitting. CWD has been picked up by wild deer and elk across Canada, Wyoming and Colorado. And sheep are being reported with their own version, a neurological degenerative disease called scrapie.

Whatever the form, the diseases in our meat may have roots more in greed and the demise of family farms than in tangled prions.

On my grandparents' small farms, cows ran on pasture and grew up eating grass, hay and silage, not each other. Since the advent of factory farming, material made from "cooked ruminants" aka dead cows as well as chickens and pigs and from their manure and bones has been supplied to penned cattle, chickens and pigs as feed. To boost profits, feed manufacturers recycle --a sort of animal version of "Soylent Green" in which animals are fed bones and waste of their possibly infected cousins. Whether shrimp in the former mangrove forests of Thailand or black Angus cattle in Nebraska feedlots, these are more factory than farm. They are about speed and density, monocultures that produce lagoons of waste and meat with little flavor. My grandparents would have been horrified.

BSE and its human version Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (NVCJD) were recognized in the UK in 1985. In 1988, UK feed companies were ordered to destroy their feed, but they made a second move based on greed: they sold the poisoned feed worldwide, according to the World Health Organization.

Now there is talk of more cattle inspections, of tagging and tracking elk, of more autopsies, of increased FDA surveillance- only 2,600 carcasses of the 36,416,200 US cattle slaughtered last year were checked for BSE. All of this is well intended, but it's an attempted mop-up of an unmoppable mess. And it misses the easiest ways to prevent any further risk.

When there were small farms in a big world, meat was safer. On my family's farms, the sheep and goats ate apples and grass in the orchard, the cows (who had names not numbers) snuffled down the hay, the guinea fowl, geese and chickens pecked up ticks and flies and grain, and the pigs ate everything including the odd dead hen and part of the neighbor's hired man who fell into the pen while drunk, or so my grandfather said, by way of warning me and my two sisters as we teetered on the pig pen fence on our stomachs, petting pigs and hurling ears of corn to them. We all - animals and humans- ate mostly what was bred and grown locally, processed at the local elevator, put up in grandpa's corn crib, stacked in the hay mow or silo, glistened in jars in the pantry or in the freezer. The most exotic imports on our family's table were oysters for the Christmas eve stew and grapefruit that arrived in mid-winter in a sturdy decorative box, each precious, plump globe nestled in tissue paper.

Now there are flesh factories in a world made small by mass travel, shipped feed and transported animals, and we seem dangerously entangled by our tongues. Diners in Amsterdam eat hens from Bresse (France), argentine beef sizzles on Manhattan grills, caribbean lobster goes down California gullets. Now pyres of cow carcasses rot on the fields of Ireland and England, and the legacy of generations of careful livestock breeding is destroyed in incinerators while spokespeople from american agricultural departments reassure us daily that our meat is safe, that we have firewalls against such tragedies. Meanwhile, sheep from Belgium imported to Vermont were recently found to have scrapie.

I am the grandchild of Iowa farmers, and a craving for bacon, beef and bratwurst is hardwired into my brain. I am descended from hunters, and in the bloodier, more paleolithic parts of my soul, it seems normal to relish the winter venison steaks, Easter lamb and summer sausage. Just as we feared while squatting in caves and later in rough cabins and flimsy farmhouses, however, things from the woods and jungle can eat us - but these days we bring them to the table on serving platters.

There are two sturdy rolls of elk sausage in my freezer, a gift from a neighbor who hunts out west. I have the stomach and the palate of a carnivore, but until the small farms rise again, this might be a good time to listen to my vegetarian heart.

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