

Hannah Powers

Where's the Beef? (Not Here)

Juicy hamburgers and succulent roasted chicken are a mainstay of most omnivorous Americans' diets, but have you ever had the pleasure of chowing down on a marinated venison steak or popping a bite of fried alligator tail? Branching out from the typical beef, pork, and chicken trinity and into so-called "exotic meats" doesn't have to actually mean exotic. Sometimes it doesn't even mean leaving the barnyard. North America offers a plethora of options, from deer, elk and bison back down the scale to rabbit and squirrel. Ostrich burgers have become almost ordinary, but there are places too, to find antelope, kangaroo, and wild boar burgers for those with adventurous taste buds. Discerning diners should know where to look, as the usual suspects are rapidly becoming not enough, whether folks are concerned about the industrial food complex, their cholesterol, or just not being bored by what's on their plate.

SMALL FARM: Goat & Lamb

"Personally, I don't like being stepped on by cows," Larry Jacoby, co-owner of Shepard Song Farm in Wisconsin, says in describing how he got into the lamb and goat business. While not unusual enough to raise eyebrows, many Americans may have never encountered the meat outside of a gyro stand. "When's the last time you had goat?" Jacoby prompts. "Lamb? 'It's okay.' You didn't like it. That's because you had bad lamb."

Depending on the time of year, Jacoby keeps anywhere between 500 to 900 goats on his farm. The animals are more uncommon meat livestock because they are more difficult to raise, in no small part due to their nasty temperaments. He describes them as equal parts four-year-old boy and fourteen-year-old girl: “They’re always getting into trouble and aren’t very nice to each other.” But Jacoby has found a way to raise them profitably, and does so humanely on grass and tubers.

Jacoby can raise a goat to an 80-pound slaughter weight in 14 to 16 months. Lamb takes 6 to 11 months to reach a 120-pound slaughter weight, but it doesn’t necessarily mean lamb is more profitable. “It’s what you sell, where you sell, and what they eat that determines it,” Jacoby says. Jacoby sells his goats to four-star restaurants by the carcass.

Goat is a versatile animal, eaten the world over. “You can prepare it in mind-boggling ways,” Jacoby says. “Grilled, poled, bone in, barbecue, quick cooked, slow cooked, raw; if you can think of a way to cook something, you can do it with a goat, and people do.” Ethnicity plays a part in how one might cook it, Jacoby notes. His daughter-in-law is Turkish, and loves to eat roast leg of goat on a bed of tomatoes and onions, but Jacoby prefers ground goat in chili or spaghetti sauce, in a hot dish, or even as a burger.

Goat fares best when cooked rare to medium. Jacoby describes the flavor as somewhat mineral-y, and very delicate: the flavor is very dependent on how the animal is raised in a way beef isn’t. Grass-fed absolutely makes a difference, but he also attributes bad lamb and goat meat on the market to dual purpose animals. Namely, sheep raised for wool, or goats for milk. “You would not consider fine dining on a dairy animal,” he says, “same as you wouldn’t a [laying] chicken. You compromise a lot when you do dual purpose.”

FEDERAL INSPECTION

A mark of approval by the USDA is a requirement, not a gold star, when selling meat products for consumption in the United States. Cattle, swine, sheep and goats, and most domesticated birds sourced for meat, including ostrich, are automatically inspected: tax dollars at work. Those more uncommon sources like reindeer, elk and antelope, bison, rabbit, and game birds can be inspected on request at an additional fee if intended to be sold wholesale. Meat products intended to be sold across state borders need to be inspected at a federal site rather than a state facility.

Jim Dickson, Professor of Food Science at Iowa State University, explains the fee is essentially a bill from the USDA for the inspector's "overtime".

"Some people get confused, think they are walking outside and handing the inspector a wad of cash. It's not like that," Dickson explains. The difference between state and federal facilities boils down to, while not letting unsafe food through, a little more give in a neighborly way with state facilities. Third parties like Dickson are called in to determine what to do in case of doubt with a product. On the other side, "There is a perception that federal inspectors are like highway patrol with a radar gun, waiting for you to do something wrong", he says.

Meat products outside of these categories falls under FDA inspection. For example, alligator, which is consumed in several southern states, most prominently Louisiana. FDA inspections don't require an inspector be present at slaughter.

Do you need to give extra scrutiny to determining how the meat on your local grocery shelves was inspected? Dickson says no. "Every time you consume a raw agricultural commodity, there's a risk. But if it's handled properly and cooked properly, there is no risk."

LARGE FARM: EIk

Scott Salonek runs Premium Midwest, one of only a handful of major elk farming operations in the U.S. He keeps some 50 animals on his own farm in Minnesota, but his business pulls animals from around 30 different producers across the U.S. with about 500 animals total. Salonek describes the meat as very finely textured, slightly sweeter than beef, and very lean. Because there is almost no fat, elk needs to be cooked rare to medium rare or it can become dry.

Salonek's friendly, no-nonsense approach to marketing his product, picking up the phone and banging on doors, has netted his elk jerky a spot on the shelves of national convenience and sporting goods chains like Sportsman's Warehouse. His elk also shows up on restaurant tables, although Salonek sells pallets to restaurant distributors rather than to individual restaurants.

Salonek's livelihood rests on the sale of elk, but he admits it will never have the power of beef in the meat industry.

"It's for sure a niche product. They are not raised on the production level. You could kill all the elk in the country, farm and wild, in two days, compared to the beef and hog operations out there," he says. All cards on the table, raising elk isn't profitable from meat alone. All aspects of the elk industry need to be applied to the operation, which is why Salonek is also in the breeding stock and antler velvet business.

Elk on dinner plates may soon be moving solely into the realm of personal hunters. Salonek notes it's a dying industry: disease took out a lot of stock ten years ago and very few young people are getting into the business. Other times, farmers get too attached to an animal to know when it's no longer cost efficient and needs to be sent to slaughter. It's as good a reason as any for diners to taste it while they still can.

GROCERY: Rabbit & Others

Eco-friendly grocery chain Whole Foods recently rolled out a pilot program to begin stocking rabbit in their stores. Michael Dur, team leader of the West Des Moines Whole Foods, says, “We had customers asking for it, so we found a supplier...we were happy to source a rabbit. We worked with farms in Iowa for over four years to find a standard that would work for us and our customer.” Dur himself recalls his grandmother serving rabbit growing up.

Rabbits were once a staple on the patriotic American’s table, in particular during World War II. They were promoted as meat animals by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of Agriculture, as well as LIFE magazine, and raised in backyards the country over, fed on scraps from victory gardens before they landed on a platter. The animal is entirely white meat – good news for all those who know the white/dark argument when the Thanksgiving turkey goes ‘round every year! The tender meat has a very mild, inoffensive taste, and is high in protein but low in fat. And, as everyone knows, rabbits reproduce very quickly. Because of their small size, it’s very easy to determine serving size: one animal per person.

Mariano’s, a high-end grocery chain in the Chicago area, has begun stocking camel meat. The chain already offered an array of exotic meat from alligator tail to boar spare ribs, pheasant, and ostrich burgers. However, availability depends on the individual store and what customers are asking for. The camel meat comes ground, at \$12.99 per pound, and purportedly tastes like lamb.

Justin, a worker at the meat department at the Mariano’s Oak Lawn location, says, “It’s interesting when [customers] come in. It just draws their attention,” referring to the sign in the freezer aisle labeled ‘Wild Game Meats’. (Store Policy is not to release last names of workers).

Although exotic meats account for less than 1% of their total sales, the store has plans to do more with marketing, including in-store cooking demonstrations, in the near future. Justin says, “I haven’t tried any myself, but I do plan to get some ground camel someday.”

RESTAURANT: Exotic Meat

Sammy’s Wild Game Grill in Houston, Texas has landed on a number of lists for a meat eater’s paradise. The grill boasts burgers made from water buffalo and antelope, sausage from duck and pheasant, and chili made from python meat, to name but a few options. Samuel “Sammy” Ballarin had been in the restaurant industry for only about a year himself when he decided to try something new, although his father had been a restaurateur.

Ballarin saw a trend toward a more health conscious restaurant patron, and wanted to explore his options beyond beef. Game meat as a whole trends toward higher protein, lower carbohydrates, and lower cholesterol than beef, as well as being less “heavy” than red meat. The choice seemed obvious when Ballarin considered the hunting culture in Texas, and those who might be aware of these options but unclear on how to get them. Ballarin sources most of his meat from a local supplier in Houston, and some directly from nearby ranches. The kangaroo, however, he has shipped in from Australia.

His personal favorites are the camel and antelope burgers — he describes antelope as a particularly juicy and flavorful meat. A recent addition to the menu — tacos — rotates meats and generates a lot of customer buzz with its simple dressing of cilantro, avocado, and onion. The sausages come with seasonings like fruit, herbs, and wine or brandy cooked into the casing. Sammy notes that he doesn’t really need to treat the meat that much differently than he

would beef, besides watching for overcooking. The exception is snake. It's a tough meat that needs to be slow-cooked.

For all that his food sounds high class, Ballarin shoots for a “fast-casual” style, and even offers his “dogs” to-go through a take-out window, served on a pretzel bread bun, making his offerings more available than other exotic options.

COOKBOOK: Game Meat

For those who are up to the task, Hank Shaw has written two cookbooks based on his hunter-gatherer lifestyle. An avid gardener and angler since childhood, Shaw started hunting at age 32 on a pheasant-shooting trip with his fellow outdoor reporter at the St. Paul Pioneer Press in Minnesota. He describes the experience as “completing the circle for me”.

Shaw sees the element of betrayal inherent in raising animals for meat as a larger moral dilemma than hunting, especially since wild creatures have not “been bred to be stupid.”

“A backyard chicken is nowhere near as smart as a pheasant”, which to Shaw’s mind brings a measure of equality to the playing field. He likens it to baseball: “A good batter hits the ball thirty percent of the time. A good duck hunter who sees 200 ducks and gets 7 is having a really good day.” While he agrees that hunting is not a sustainable method for the whole population, he sees a lot of room for growth.

A large point of contention for Shaw is the missed opportunities found in small game. For a lot of people, hunting means only deer or elk. In his cookbook, *Hunter Angler Gardener Cook*, Shaw lists recipes in defense of the hare, squirrel, and small bird, and brushes aside critics of the “poor person’s” food with a “more for us, then” attitude. Most meals using rabbit and hare meat come from traditional old world recipes — Shaw recommends braising.

Meanwhile, squirrel is American to its roots, and the original pot pie recipe even calls for squirrel.

Shaw also lists recipes for pigeon, noting the meat is rather dense and best grilled, as well as more unconventional large game like wild boar and bear. In the case of the last two, he recommends knowing the foliage of the area in which you hunt, because the diet of the animal determines the flavor of the meat. Merganser, a species of duck that subsists solely on fish, suffers in taste for it, “but other than that,” Shaw says, “you can make anything taste good.” Muskrats, which he doesn’t care for, are a beloved dish in Delaware, and Newfoundlanders dig the skin on seabirds that most North Americans cook off. But people need to explore to learn these things.

“They’re all radically different in taste,” Shaw says. “There are animals that share a texture to chicken, like frog or rabbit, but neither taste like chicken. But that’s the only point of reference you have to bounce off of. The more you eat, the more you can tell the difference.” Pheasant, for example, is a very mild tasting bird that is accessible to many people, but the similar looking sharp tailed grouse is very strongly flavored.

Shaw has his own explanation for why there’s a growing trend toward the new-old food and the born-again organic. “People understand even if they can’t put it into words how divorced from nature we are, and they recognize it as an inherently bad and dangerous thing. Even to retain a vestige to what we used to do for a living as a hobby makes us more human, even if it’s just fishing in Lake Michigan or taking your kids berry picking.”