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I ♥ Meat

Current Edition



by Vanessa Chang

It started with a beautifully braised chuck roast. I transformed it with time and a bottle of wine into an offering that is at once unpretentious and irresistible.

Irresistible, that is, if you eat meat. But I had forgotten that there was a vegetarian seated among us. The lacto-ovo-pesce-vegetarian stared at the faintly bubbling beef in its juices with large hunks of vegetables.

"I can't eat this," he said matter-of-factly. (Though I am sure he noticed the earthy, savory smells wafting out of the pot, carnal source or not.) "Even the vegetables are tainted." The last word made me wince. Although I am known for my patience, my ego and allegiance flared—as wide and as silently as my nostrils. My partner Andy, "the Voracious One", who was sitting across from me, shot me a look. Down, girl.

I have tried to practice thinking before I actually open my big mouth, but it doesn't always happen. This time, given the large number of people around the table staring at me and The Vegetarian, I did.

[A brief recap of my imagined reply: "First of all, nothing I cook is ever 'tainted.' Everything in that humble little pot of mine is nowhere near anything considered 'tainted,' hygienically or morally. On the contrary, it's a hell of a lot more wholesome than the crap, you as a vegetarian, have put into your body today. I saw you wolfing down those Hot Tamales and sports drinks earlier. I'm sure you can scrounge up a veggie burger made with genetically modified soy beans cultivated on razed Brazilian rain-forest." Oh

Snap!]

When I snapped out of my reverie, I took a breath and said, "Sorry, I didn't know you would be eating with us, but you should know that everything on the table is local. The vegetables are from my friend's garden. The beef came from ranchers who I met at the farmers market—I've even been to visit them on their land and have seen the animals. They are free-range, raised without all of the crap industrial feed lots use. And plus, it's really delicious."

The Vegetarian shook his head. "It's meat. It's wrong. It used to be alive. It's gross." And with that, he sat with nothing but an ascetic repast of bread and butter and red wine, while the rest of us moved on with ladles of meltingly tender beef and veggies.

I admired The Vegetarian's will, and I could not fault him for his thinking. I thought eating meat was wrong for a long time. Back when I was a lot more vociferous and energetic, I was a vegetarian. Not the make-my-sprouted-grain-rolls-and-quinoa-salad-from-scratch variety, mind you. I was a vending machine vegetarian, subsisting on things that did not contain animal products or other life forms: read Cheetos and Kit Kats.

Then one day, I smelled bacon cooking. Eventually, I learned to again love ribs, roasted chicken, and a thick-cut porterhouse steak. My mother also reminded me how fortunate we are to eat meat. She recounted how her family and community were so poor that the slightest morsels were served only on birthdays. To immigrants like her, meat signified success. Recently, I have learned to admire and respect the people who provide me with said cuts of meat.

However, my exchange with The Vegetarian stuck with me and I wondered: Is it possible to be a responsible, sustainable meat eater—to love both the animal and the meat? In this day and age, most eaters are far removed from food production of any kind—especially meat—and we either know too much (the sad and truly gross reality of industrial meat) or too little. We rarely have to put a face to the meat we eat.

Statistics illustrate that eating less meat is desirable for our own personal health and environs. Coupled with an increased exposure to sustainable ranchers, poultry and pig farmers, many eaters are recalibrating their relationships to meat with local beef, pork, poultry and lamb. Personally, if I am going to eat flesh less often, I want it to be the good stuff. And with the holidays rolling around, a time when we are in-let-us-be-thankful mode, it seems apropos to have an inkling about the people who raise the roasts and turkeys locally.

This is hard to do when statistically speaking, we are a nation of people who believe that the supermarket is the ultimate source of food. By now, we have all heard stories of children who can't imagine vegetables emerging from the soil of an actual farm, much less identify the animals associated with cellophane packages of meat. I didn't really believe this though until I volunteered for one of Slow Food Utah's many After-School Kids' Nutrition programs.

"Where does food come from?" the nutritionist asked. Hands shot up. The supermarket. The vending machine. The nutritionist passed around a hand out—a cute depiction of a farm with a rosy-cheeked farmer, a barn, plump chickens, and a cow grazing in the field. For the kids, this might as well have been an illustrator's account of an average day on Mount Olympus with Zeus and friends.

Not a single one of them could point out the cow as the source of beef or milk. To them, beef was beef. But then again, I noticed the nutritionist did not go to great lengths to explain that the beef was once a cow—a living, breathing animal. Maybe that was for another lesson.



ON THE LAMB

My own lesson with local meat began in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by hundreds of sheep. Delta, Utah, lies about 140 miles southwest of Salt Lake and its thriving farmers markets. During the winter, Jamie and Linda Gillmor make up part of the 3,000 people who call this town home. If you count the sheep, the population is more like 4,500. When temperatures drop and snow covers the ground, this quiet piece of central Utah becomes the home of Morgan Valley Lamb.

Today, Jamie, Linda and a shepherd named Modesto, guide the sheep from one feeding pasture to another, being careful not to let the eager animals stray into a neighbor's plot. I volunteered to come down and help, as best a 5-foot-1-inch thing can in the face of all that animal force hell bent on getting to the good stuff waiting in fields.

In the distance, plumes of smoke rise from the stacks of the Intermountain Power Plant; the energy it creates destined to go west to Nevada and California. Many of the Gillmor's Delta neighbors are displaced farmers, some from as far away as the East Coast, looking to re-root their livelihoods on soil most scientists would deem too poor to grow anything. But amazingly, they do. Clover, alfalfa, corn, and other crops cover the flat valley.

Ever since the Gillmors traded their Salt Lake land for a place in Delta, it has been their sheep's job to eat the cover crops come winter. Thousands of hooves on asphalt sound like a summer thunderstorm in the middle of winter. A couple of cars wait patiently on either end of the woolly mass, waiting to continue on the road. The drivers wave to Jamie as he walks by—Delta's rush hour.

The Gillmor family has been raising lamb in Utah for three generations. Sheep have been grazing the state's hills, mountain pastures and valley floors even longer than that, but despite the pioneer ranching traditions, family ranchers rearing lamb and beef are now a rarity. The Gillmors were some of the first Utah ranchers to recognize the potential of the growing "local food scene" to preserve the family business of producing all-natural, range-fed,

hormone-free lamb. Both Jamie and Linda pounded the pavement, making their way through restaurant backdoors, and involving themselves in organizations like Slow Food Utah and Local First to get the word out about their lamb.

"We have to be everything," Linda says. "Ranchers, accountants, salespeople, webmasters, marketers. Most farmers and ranchers keep a day job or take on a second job to support their families." She explains this in her kitchen where she raised a family with batches of chocolate chip cookies and her Yorkshire pudding—a simple, yet forgotten delight whipped up from eggs, milk, oil and flour. She puts some into the oven on the rack above the leg of lamb that Jamie started before this morning's mass migration of sheep.

By the time we sit down to eat, I am starving and feeling like I deserve every single calorie and ounce of fat. "What time did you get up?" I ask with my mouth full of the flavorful lamb. Jamie, a soft-spoken man, thinks for a moment, "I guess before sunrise. I had to move some of the sheep with Modesto."

I feel my forehead etching itself with terms like city slicker and spoiled brat. For a moment, I slow down my chewing. "It must be hard with the long hours," I say. "It can be, but I can't imagine doing anything else," Jamie replies. "Back in kindergarten, I remember the teacher asking each of us what we wanted to be when we grew up. One kid said 'doctor', another said 'nurse' or 'teacher', and me? I said I wanted to be a sheep rancher."

Linda starts a pot of coffee as Jamie yawns. Though the day started early, there is still more work to be done. Ranching is an intensive labor of love for families like the Gillmors. They raise children, work full time, and even earn master's degrees on the side, but ultimately—the animals and their rhythms dictate daily life. Birthing season does not stop at 5pm, and they know full well that raising quality lamb is not possible without good land, which is difficult to come by these days.

It is a sunny day in Hard Scrabble Canyon, on the backside of the Wasatch just north of Salt Lake City, when I catch up with Jamie the following summer. Wearing a cowboy hat and a semi-permanent grin, his blue eyes scan the lush, wild grasses and scrub oak. With his finger and the dirt on the ground, Jamie maps out the area where his sheep will graze (also a cooperative wildlife management area). It's such a quiet and beautiful spot, I am surprised to learn it's just a few mountain ridges away from Lagoon.

He knows his sheep are somewhere along this road his family built, the same land where his father and grandfather tended their sheep. To the untrained eye it is almost impossible to spot them from afar, but Jamie has no trouble finding the 500-strong flock on the other side of the rushing creek. He hands me a tiny, lavender-colored blossom. "Try it," he directs. When I do, I taste a soft whisper of onion, fresh and delicious. It is what the lambs are feasting on, along with slender blades of green grass.

Over the rush of the creek, Jamie talks with Celesitino—a shepherd from Peru who relies on his energetic dog to keep the flock together, and a shoulder-slung rifle to ward off coyotes and mountain lions. The day has been good. Sunny weather, warm temperatures. The sheep are resting in the shade of giant Cottonwood trees.

Lamb bleats cut the quiet canyon air as Jamie sets off on foot a little farther up the road. The sound of his footsteps stops two truant sheep dead in their tracks. They have wandered off from the safety of the flock, and the watchful eyes of the shepherd and his dog. After a few moments, they trot on ahead thinking they can outrun Jamie, their steward, and the steward of this land for the past two decades.

Jamie expands his chest and lets out an ear-piercing whoop. The trotting animals freeze, their faces like naughty school kids caught mid-practical joke. He hollers once more waving his arms. The sheep run back to the flock, leaving a cloud of dust from which Jamie emerges chuckling.

THE BEEF

Later that summer I am at the Downtown Farmers Market in Salt Lake City. I am waiting in line. In front of me is a woman who slowly and disapprovingly scans the sign that lists the prices of the items for sale. "\$4.95 a pound?" she asks incredulously.

There are archetypes at each market. This woman is A Complainer. They spot, they approach, they scrutinize and criticize. And take up my time with their whining about how they can get "the same thing" for half the price at the grocery store. I once coolly told a fellow shopper that she should "go there then, and get out of my way because I had some shopping to do, and man, was I gonna eat good!"

When I ask Deborah Myrin from Canyon Meadows Ranch if she has ever had such of an issue, she gives me a surprised look. "Actually, our customers have been really good about understanding what we're doing." On this day at the Sugar House Farmers Market, it is about 100°, but Deborah looks as if she is hardly breaking a sweat.

Her family, like the Gillmor's, has roots in ranching and understands the importance of keeping the tradition alive in a sustainable, grass-fed sort of way. And with an increased awareness about local food, their idea of good beef is gaining traction with a hungry clientele.

After studying and living out-of-state, Deborah eventually came home to Altamont, Utah, and along with her parents and siblings, got the Red Angus herd grazing on their verdant pastures in the Uinta Mountains.

As customers at the market walk by, eyeing the Canyon Meadows sign, Deborah describes their intensive focus on sustainability. "We rotate pasture land to prevent overgrazing," she says. "Our land and the forest range land the cattle graze on are homes to other animals, and we want to make sure it stays that way." Canyon Meadows is even working with a group from Utah State University and the Forest Service to determine how sage grouse can thrive in such responsibly tended areas.

Deborah is also soft-spoken, but once prodded with questions about product, family and land, she opens up with humble expertise that is reassuring to consumers new to terms like grass-fed and free-range. Deborah in particular represents a new face to ranching. The old guard, like her father (a former state senator and part of the Cowboy Caucus – the quintessential, older gentleman you imagine in boots and a cowboy hat) has seen a lot of change over the years, not all of it good—and it is clear that he is proud of his daughter. You can picture Deborah in the hat and

boots too, but she would look just as natural selling microfleece in candy colors at Patagonia, as she does selling delicious cuts of meat at the farmers market. She is among a new generation of cattle ranchers revitalizing old Western traditions: vast open space, the rancher and the cattle. For her and her family—it is a way of life.

"My favorite memories are of the cattle drive. Everyone—my mom and dad and my brothers and sisters—would move with the herd," she says. "It took a couple of days, but I always looked forward to that."

The next day, I catch a glimpse of her from afar at the Downtown Farmers Market. People are lining up to buy and ask her questions. Working alone in the booth, she seems as calm as she was in the quiet heat the day before. "We sell a lot of steaks and ground beef," she says. "People don't really know what to do with roasts and other cuts." Throughout the market, there has been a recent proliferation of small-scale meat producers: Star G Bar Ranch, Heritage Valley Poultry, Clifford Family Farms, Taylor Made Pork & Beef, and Lau Family Farms to name a few.

Later, I catch Jennifer Gillmor (a cousin of the Morgan Valley Lamb family) at Star G Bar Ranch. "So what's good this week?" I inquire. "The flank steak is really good. We grill it and slice it up for fajitas and tacos," Jennifer replies. I'm sold. As she hands me the vacuum-packed bundle, she gets my attention. "Could you please tell people how to use other cuts of meat?" she implores. "No one wants to buy shoulder, but everyone wants tenderloin. What am I supposed to do with the rest of the cow?"

That conversation is on my mind later as I marinate the two skinny steaks. Without a grill, I have learned to broil in the oven, and soon enough, I have a pile of thinly sliced flank steak swaddled into warm corn tortillas. Juicy, tender and flavorful; I cannot imagine anything being better at that moment.

CHICKENS AND EGGS

Helping customers understand the beauty of the whole animal is a common challenge among meat producers, but this may be especially true for the Anderson family of Heritage Valley Poultry. They are producing fresh, whole turkey, goose, duck, rabbit and chicken. Problem is, according to Nels Anderson, a jovial and generous man, people are unaccustomed to buying a whole animal; and when it comes to the chicken, if he sells the white meat breasts, no one seems willing to buy the thighs and the legs.

For me, these are the most worthwhile parts and a whole bird is frugality at its most elegant—roast chicken becomes chicken salad or fodder for chicken soup, which is fortified with the carcass simmered long and gently in water.

Price is also an issue for the Andersons. Chicken is glorified as a plentiful, buxom and cheap meat, and bringing people up to speed on what it actually takes to sustainably raise the birds on their Tremonton farm takes some doing. "I tell people you won't be able to find a chicken that's as well-tended and happy," Nels says. "Plus, we get them to people fresh." For journalistic reasons, I stay outwardly placid, nodding and listening. In my mind, however, I am jumping up and down waving a drumstick and shouting amen!

As I write this, Nels is still figuring out his customer base, and customers are still figuring out what it means to have a variety of

sustainably produced poultry available to them. He is hoping that with the holidays, more people will inquire about his fresh turkeys.

Amber B. is the red-headed, sassy sister I never had. She has a fabulous cadre of "ladies"—one Rhode Island Red and four Silver-Laced Wyandottes—that supply her with eggs she forages from her bushy lavender shrubs in her suburban backyard. Among the many things we share, is a love of meat. She makes a mean roasted chicken, and beef stroganoff with mushrooms she and her husband Rob proffer at their Gnome Grown Mushrooms booth at the farmers market.

Yet, she admits, she could not imagine stuffing one of the ladies into a pot when their happy pecking lives come to an end. "They're my ladies," she says, "I couldn't." When her other Rhode Island Red was painfully ill, she knew she should put her out of her misery. She thought about it, even brought out the hatchet. But in the end, it was Rob, a softie himself, who succinctly put Big Red out of her misery.

I, too, love Amber's chickens. They do have personalities. But whether it is my greed or my hunger, I cannot say that I am so fond of them that I wouldn't consider revisiting Julia Child's coq au vin recipe when their peaceful ends come (and I'm the one who blubbered during a PBS documentary about chickens.) Somewhere between eating Cheetos as a political statement and proselytizing bacon, I came to understand that no matter what I eat, something had to come to an end. I revere everything from the maittake mushroom that was once part of a vibrant ecosystem to the turkey on my holiday table. I am not a religious person, but I have decided that when I choose to buy, eat and serve something that lived well and happily every bite will be worshipped at the altar of my dining table.



WHOLE HOG

Pigs, though, are another matter. I adore pigs. I adore pork in all forms. If I were to eat peyote and spend hours in a sweat lodge, I would most likely discover the pig as my true spirit animal. Of all the critters I have met face-to-face, the pang of human guilt was never so strong as the day I met a Berkshire cross breed pig at Russell Taylor's ranch in Emery, Utah, where he raises organic beef and pork. The landscape surrounding his acreage looks barren, but there is life in the soil and everywhere on it. Taylor suggested I visit after weeks of asking him questions about the pig. Once, in my attempt to seem like a practical hedonist, I asked if I could be present for a slaughter. "I want to know where my meat comes from," I explained.

"There isn't much to see," he said matter-of-factly. "It's quick, a bullet through the forehead, and then they're done." I whimpered

a little, but he did not seem to hear me over the commotion at the farmers market. Taylor has a trait I have noticed to be common among farming folk. Whether they pull carrots, ranch or practice animal husbandry while tending crops: they regard death to be as much a part of life as, well, life is.

Tell that to people like me who cannot accompany a friend to the animal shelter without bawling. Granted, we are not picking anything out to prepare for a meal, but still, the notion is overbearing. So how could I or anyone else have gone through life this far content to eat animals? And now in my case, to actually meet what might be one of my future dinners?

She was a behemoth. With her pink skin and tender hide covered by blonde bristles, she immediately trotted over to us when she saw and heard Russ' voice calling out to her. She murmured, no snorted, as she walked up against the fence. We had interrupted her mud break in the pit Russ built for her and the other hogs. In fact, he constructed their sizeable abode with his own hands. It was larger than most housing plots in Sandy. "Why all of this for pigs?" I ask.

"Well, they like to forage and play," Russ says as he scratches the huge pig with a branch. "And it gets hot, they like to have the shade and the mud to wallow and you know, be a pig." By this point, she seems genuinely elated by the attention. I even thought I caught a grin from her thin lips.

Admittedly, it was hard to think of her when I flattened the piece of pork belly I bought from Russ. There is Catholic guilt, Jewish guilt, and then there is Korean guilt. Mine was out in full force as I scored the pink skin and basted it with the soy, ginger and star anise mixture I prepared to compliment the fatty jewel. I heard The Vegetarian's voice. It used to be alive. The guilt was still there when I pulled the pan from the oven, revealing a gorgeous, almost shellacked-looking piece of beautiful pork.

But when I took a bite, it subsided, and I realized I had never had pork like this from the supermarket. It only tastes this good when it comes from hogs with fancy names, that live more active lifestyles in the fresh air than most human couch potatoes I know. It was truly alive. And for that reason, it was so good.

Sometime after my visit, Russ sent me an e-mail. When I opened it, I found an image of a powder-puff pink piglet resting on a blanket. I could tell it was tiny and by the looks of it, injured. He wrote:

One of the sows had a huge litter. When I came to check up on her, I found this little guy practically under her weight. She had accidentally gored him with her tusk. I thought he was gone, but I noticed some life left in him so I brought him inside my house and washed the wound and bandaged it. I've got him under a heat lamp and taking in Pedialyte whenever he can. He kept me up all night, waking up every couple of hours. He's gaining strength and has quite an appetite. I also gave him some antibiotics so hopefully he won't get an infection. I won't be able to label him organic, but it doesn't matter. He deserves a fighting chance. Oh, and I named him Wilbur.

-Russ

So, during this reflective and festive harvest season, I will celebrate by tasting and savoring the deliciousness offered by the people in my community who put up the blood, sweat and tears to continue traditions and improve the quality of the land and what we eat. It is worth it to me to pay a little more to support their efforts. This season, I will eat the roast pork belly in all its shiny

glory, and replace my guilt with a good shot of gratitude. To all the Wilburs, the fat, happy pigs that like to be scratched behind their ears with their favorite stick, the rogue lambs, preening poultry, and the wise, sojourning cattle—thank you.

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To read more of Vanessa Chang's work visit her blog [She Craves](#)

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