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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

We Eat Horses, Don't We?

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RECENTLY, an official for American Horse Defense Fund, which is a fervent supporter of bills now in the United States Congress that would ban slaughtering horses for meat, declared that “the foreign-owned slaughter industry needs to understand that Americans will never view horses as dinner.”

It's a ringing statement, but it's not an entirely accurate one. As much public support as the anti-slaughter bills have and as highly as we regard this animal as a companion, co-worker and patriotic symbol, Americans have made periodic forays into horse country, hungry for an alternative red meat.

During World War II and the postwar years, when beef and pork were scarce or priced beyond most consumers' means, horsemeat appeared in the butcher's cold case. In 1951, Time magazine reported from Portland, Ore.: “Horsemeat, hitherto eaten as a stunt or only as a last resort, was becoming an important item on Portland tables. Now there were three times as many horse butchers, selling three times as much meat.” Noting that “people who used to pretend it was for the dog now came right out and said it was going on the table,” the article provided tips for cooking pot roast of horse and equine fillets.

A similar situation unfolded in 1973, when inflation sent the cost of traditional meats soaring. Time reported that “Carlson's, a butcher shop in Westbrook, Conn., that recently converted to horsemeat exclusively, now sells about 6,000 pounds of the stuff a day.” The shop was evangelical in its promotion of horse as a main course, producing a 28-page guide called “Carlson's Horsemeat Cook Book,” with recipes for chili con carne, German meatballs, beery horsemeat and more. While no longer in print, the book is catalogued on Amazon.

This is a dizzying decline from the horse's heyday as a food in Paleolithic times, when it was one of the chief prey of the cave-dwellers of France, who painted gripping scenes of its

pursuit. Horse has been boiled, barbecued and cured in regions of Europe and Asia ever since. Mongol nomads relied on the blood of their steeds as they swept westward. Marco Polo tells how they traveled "without provisions and without making a fire, living only on the blood of their horses; for every rider pierces a vein of his horse and drinks the blood."

The early church did not look happily on pagan practices in England and Iceland, where horse was consumed as part of religious ritual. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory II instructed the missionary Boniface to "tell them not to eat horses and impose severe punishments to who does it, because they are mean and evil." The Christian prohibition against eating horse flesh (joining those already adopted by Jews and Muslims) held strong in Europe for centuries. It remains an underpinning to the British and American aversion to this day.

France's later adoption of horse as a plat du jour stemmed not from callous gourmandise, but from pragmatism. Trying to strengthen its work force to meet the demands of the Industrial Revolution, the French government decreed in 1853 that each person consume 3.5 ounces of meat per day. At that time the price of a pound of horse was half that of beef. The shortages of the Franco-Prussian war (which eventually drove starving Parisians to consume rats and the residents of the zoo) sealed horse's stature as a cheap, nutritious "food of the people." Today horse remains largely a food of the working class, but since its cost is now comparable to beef, the once-flourishing horse butcheries of Paris are becoming an endangered species.

Hunger and the desire to nourish one's children are by far the most effective trampling of food taboos, and they have been the main forces behind America's sporadic appreciation of horse as a culinary item. But clannish customs also hold sway. Such practices recently influenced an isolated pocket of our nation as surely as they did Odin-worshippers who ate burnt equine offerings in the god's name.

Until the late 1970s, the Harvard Faculty Club served horse steaks as a regular menu item. The dish was abandoned only when the rerouting of Harvard Square traffic meant the delivery truck could no longer get through. A 1998 Harvard Crimson article on the history of the club states that "professors still recall the dish fondly." As they would — its very oddity, even repulsiveness to the outside world reinforced their sense of being members of a unique and special tribe.

It can be said, awkwardly, that horses are America's sacred cows. But our reverence stems not just from their noble equine attributes. Our ability to commune wordlessly, with a shift in the saddle, the flick of a rein, a whistle, forges a transcendent relationship. I have eaten all

manner of improbable items, from antelope to waterbug, but the fact that horses so graciously did my bidding several decades ago means I won't knowingly eat their kind (or dog, or dolphin) unless hard times make it a necessity.

It's easy to denounce the inhumane transport and slaughter of horses, even before taking into account the significant environmental cost of transporting 100,000 carcasses and animals a year thousands of miles to overseas markets.

But the fate of less charismatic food animals is also a brutal business. Last year, 150 pigs being shipped from Ohio to a Texas slaughterhouse died after spending up to 72 hours in a truck with no water, food or relief from 95 degree heat. The dispatch of male chicks on an egg farm can be flat-out horrific. The ill treatment of slaughter-bound horses is bad, but it would be worse still if it made us pay less attention to the undue suffering of other food animals.

There are solid reasons to object to horse slaughter. But to imply that it is somehow un-American doesn't go the distance. Americans have eaten it, even enjoyed it, though never so much to keep it coming in times of plenty, except at Harvard. Horsemeat has been a traditional hardship food. Those seeking to ban it in Congress would serve best by ensuring that we never miss it.

Christa Weil is the author of "Fierce Food: The Intrepid Diner's Guide to the Unusual, Exotic and Downright Bizarre."

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