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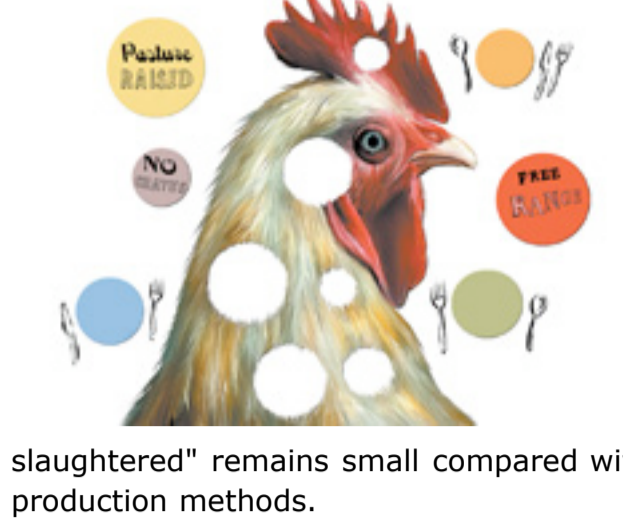
Rights groups note restaurant chains' animal friendliness

10:00 PM CDT on Friday, November 2, 2007

By **KAREN ROBINSON-JACOBS / The Dallas Morning News**
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When you make your living serving meals to Americans, meat is almost always on the menu.

But growing numbers of U.S. restaurants are picking suppliers who vow to give farm animals a better life before they're slaughtered.



Companies as diverse as Wolfgang Puck and Burger King are impressing sensitive consumers with meals featuring eggs from so-called cage-free hens or pork from pigs not confined to crates or small barn stalls.

The percent of animal products that animal rights activists would call "humanely raised and slaughtered" remains small compared with that from industrial-type production methods.

Producers, and the restaurants they supply, know that the added cost of more humane husbandry can be more than chicken feed.

Using more humane procedures can add up to 10 percent to the meat's cost, one pork producer estimates. It often means more acres of expensive farmland to allow animals more space, and longer waits before they are sufficiently fattened to market.

But after years of crying in the wilderness, some animal rights groups say the food industry is starting to come around.

"If you look at the past three years, it's more [movement] than in the prior three decades," said Paul Shapiro, senior director at the Washington, D.C.-based Humane Society of the United States. "It's clear we're seeing a real tidal wave of progress."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has no official definition of "humane." For activists, the definition can be 30 pages long.

But, generally, they would say it means the animal is fed, housed and slaughtered in a way that doesn't inflict unnecessary pain or discomfort.

This year, Miami-based Burger King, the nation's second-largest burger chain, along with regional burger chains Carl's Jr. and Hardee's, the Cheesecake Factory restaurant chain and celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck made humane sourcing commitments, agreeing to get at least some of their products from humane vendors.

At one end of the spectrum is the whole-hog approach of Wolfgang Puck, who announced in March that throughout his fine dining, fast casual and catering operations, he would use only eggs from cage-free hens and pork and veal from animals not kept in crates.

A more modest approach was taken by Burger King, which announced in April that it would start phasing in cage-free eggs, substituting them for what amounts to 2 percent of the eggs used at its company-owned restaurants. Ten percent of its pork will be crate-free this year, added spokesman Keve Silversmith.

These moves come seven years after Denver-based Chipotle Mexican Grill became one of the first major U.S. restaurant chains to commit to humane sourcing for pork.

Chipotle spokesman Chris Arnold and others see the more recent conversions as the result of a confluence of factors, ranging from consumers' desire to eat foods seen as healthier to a growing compassion for farm animals.

Groups such as Humane Farm Animal Care, based in Herndon, Va. and offering producers a "humane" certification, decry the use of crates and cages so small they keep animals such as laying hens, sows and veal calves from turning around, stretching their legs or resting comfortably.

Cattle tend to be raised closer to a humane standard, experts said. But some groups object to slaughter procedures in which one cow sees the animal just ahead in line being killed.

"There may be a legitimate debate within our society about whether animals ought to be killed for food," said Mr. Shapiro, a vegan for 14 years. "But there is not a legitimate debate about whether animals ought to be tortured before they're killed for food."

Farm operators say there are humane and efficiency-related reasons for their practices. Crates make it easier for animals to receive medical care and food, they say. Trimming a chicken's beak keeps it from pecking other birds and farm workers.

But to consumers such as Plano resident and animal welfare activist Pamela Bertsch, such procedures seem needlessly cruel.

Ms. Bertsch said meat produced more humanely is "definitely something I seek out." But, she added, "It's very hard to find."

One reliable source, she noted, is Chipotle.

In 2000, when Chipotle began offering humanely raised pork from Alameda, Calif.-based Niman Ranch, the price of its carnitas burritos rose a dollar, making it the most expensive entree on the menu, said Mr. Arnold.

But when the company told consumers the reason for the price hike, "we started selling twice as many carnitas burritos," he said.

Among the 600 restaurant users who responded to an online survey in April, nearly 60 percent ranked "animal welfare" among their top five social concerns.

However, such online surveys – this one conducted by the Chicago-based restaurant market research firm, Technomic Inc. – tend to skew toward younger and higher income consumers. And the survey did not ask whether respondents were vegetarian, a group that often feels strongly about animal welfare.

Meanwhile, a telephone survey released in October by Oklahoma State University's Department of Agricultural Economics, and funded by the American Farm Bureau Federation, found less concern.

Among the 1,019 households that provided usable answers, only 4.2 percent named farm animal well-being as their top concern, compared with nearly 24 percent who picked human poverty, the No. 1 answer. About 4 percent identified themselves as vegetarians or vegans.

Since few restaurateurs are in the business of raising hogs, cows and chickens, suppliers are key to increasing the flow of humanely raised protein onto restaurant menus.

Richard L. Lobb, director of communications for the National Chicken Council in Washington, D.C., estimates that less than 1 percent of broiler chickens are killed by the method favored by some activist groups. In that approach, called "controlled atmosphere" stunning, oxygen is replaced by an inert gas, essentially causing asphyxiation.

Typically, chickens at commercial operations are stunned, then their throats are slit.

Only about 5 percent of the 280 million laying hens in the U.S. are cage-free, according to Gene Gregory, president of the Atlanta-based United Egg Producers trade group. He said there hasn't been enough demand to prompt producers to change.

That's in part because cage-free means fewer birds can be housed in the same-size space, making the operation more expensive per bird and boosting the price of the eggs. "Consumers are still looking for eggs as cheap as they can find them," Mr. Gregory said.

Wolfgang Puck's "all-humane" commitment this spring sent one of his chefs, Andrew Hunter, in pursuit of the perfect pepperoni. Eight months later, he thinks he's close to finding it.

"There are some real challenges with finding food items that meet our quality, flavor and availability standards while at the same time hitting the humane standard," said Mr. Hunter, vice president of culinary development for Wolfgang Puck Express, the company's fast-casual brand.

Neil Dudley, general manager of Pederson's Natural Farms in Hamilton, Texas, said he frequently gets inquiries from small restaurant companies about his naturally raised pork.

"Then they find out what the price is, and they can't make that work," he said.

Mr. Dudley estimates that raising the hogs according to humane standards adds about 10 percent to his sales price.

The growth of Starbucks and other "affordable luxury" items, however, has shown that consumers will pay more if they feel it improves how they live, including how they eat.

The question now facing producers and restaurateurs is how much extra consumers will pay to improve how their food lived.

KIND WORDS

Don't know the difference between "natural" beef and "naturally-raised" beef? A dizzying array of labels now confront shoppers at the grocery store — some relating to whether the food is "organic," others indicating it was "humanely" produced.

The USDA, which oversees food claims, is in the process of crafting standards for the term "naturally raised."

In the meantime, here's a primer:

"Natural" refers to foods with minimal processing and no artificial or synthetic ingredients or preservatives. However, a **"natural"** cut of meat can come from an animal that received added hormones. The term says little about how humanely the animal was treated.

"Naturally raised" or **"pasture raised"** indicates the animal spent time grazing in grass, although the USDA has no rule for how much time.

"Cage-free" applies to egg-laying hens only and means they were not kept in the restrictive cages common in the egg-production industry, cages that provide the hens little room to move.

"Free-range" means the chickens can roam — although this may just be indoors in a barn or poultry house. It does not guarantee access to the great outdoors.

"Crate-free" is a term used for pigs and calves not confined to small containers. Again, it does not guarantee outdoor access

The Humane Society of the United States offers a "Guide to Meat and Dairy Labels" on its Web site, www.hsus.org.

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

Only a handful of major chains have signed up to serve "humanely raised and slaughtered" meat and eggs. Here are a few:

Wolfgang Puck Cos. (started March 2007)
100% cage-free eggs
100% crate-free pork and veal
No foie gras

Carl's Jr. and Hardees
15% crate-free pork, up to 25% by January 2009
2% cage-free eggs by July 2008

Burger King
2% cage-free eggs this year
10% crate-free pork this year

The Cheesecake Factory
100% humanely raised chickens
Chipotle Mexican Grill
100% humanely raised pork, beef and chicken
2000 (pork), 2001 (chicken), 2003 (beef)

SOURCE: Dallas Morning News research

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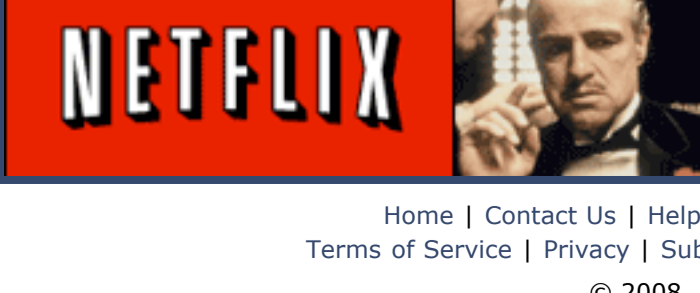
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