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BARRY ESTABROOK

POLITICS OF THE PLATE: HUMANE BEINGS

05.18.09

Thanks to new regulations and consumer demand, the market for humanely raised animal products is about to take off.



Local, seasonal, raised humanely. It may not trip off the tongue, but that could soon be the new mantra of conscientious eaters. Humane animal husbandry, now practiced by only a small number of producers, is set to explode over the next few years, becoming a hot (and welcome) trend, according to panelists addressing the [Monterey Bay Aquarium's Cooking for Solutions](#) conference last week.

"I'm working on big projects I never dreamed would happen," said Tim Amlaw, director of the farm animal program at [American Humane](#), based in Englewood, CO. "We're going to make the transition." Amlaw estimated that about 3 percent of farms raising "major animal-protein species" in the United States would currently qualify for humane certification by his group. He expects that to rise to 35 percent within the next five years.

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Part of the momentum will come from new laws and regulations. Last November, Californians passed [Proposition 2](#), which forbids farmers from confining veal calves, pregnant sows, and laying hens in crates and cages too small to allow normal movement. "Prop. 2 is just the tip of the iceberg," said Marcus Benedetti, president of [Clover Stornetta Farms](#), a [humane-certified](#) California dairy company. "If the voters in this state knew what was going on in the rest of agriculture, there would be referendum after referendum."

In addition to regulatory action, the trend toward better husbandry is being driven by consumer demand. "Our organization is 131 years old," said Amlaw. "Now, for the first time, we are moving from a model where government is pushing farmers toward better practices to a model where consumer demand is pulling them in the right direction. The best way to get corporations to make changes is to show them there's money in it. Consumers are now saying, 'We want a better food source.'"

[Temple Grandin](#), an author and associate professor of animal science at Colorado State University, specializes in developing humane husbandry and slaughter techniques. She pointed out that there were financial benefits to good practices. "It comes down to stockmanship," she said. "Well-treated cows give more milk; sows more piglets." She added that humanely killed pigs and cows produced higher quality meat than those that suffered undue stress.

Grandin, who established a set of clear, objective, numerical standards for humane slaughterhouse procedures, is currently at work on creating her own certification program for humane producers. "I don't want it to be a marketing thing," she said. "I'm going to make sure they are doing what they say they are doing."

Financial incentives, laws, and stringent monitoring are all well and good, but Grandin reminded attendees of the most important argument for humane farming. "It's the right thing to do," she said. "Animals feel pain."

PHOTOGRAPH BY BROWN CANNON III

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Putting the E back in SOLE - Thanks Barry!

Posted 6/4/2009, 3:41:39am by LDGourmet

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I own a small food brand in the UK and we are struggling to source high welfare pork for our products because demand is so high that the multiple retailers are buying it up faster than it can be produced. We can thank St Jamie (Jamie Oliver) for this. But I don't mind. Yes, it is difficult for my business, but at the same time it is great to know that our values are no long niche, but widespread. Consumer demand is, as ever, highly democratic. Retailers, on the whole publicly traded and therefore beholden to their shareholders and not the community (though they'll play lip service to it in their mission statements) will always go for profits above ethics. In this case consumer ethics are driving profits. Hoorah! Minimum animal welfare requirements in the UK are so high that for many years British farmers struggled to compete with suppliers from other markets, which lead to a good number of farms going out of business. This is the dilemma with which the US will struggle. The key will be to educate the public so that demand increases before that happens - a delicate balancing act indeed. My personal mission is to eat less meat. How on earth did we get into a situation where what was once a treat, became a daily entitlement? I would recommend anyone interested in this subject to look outside America to what is happening in the UK see the potential. Also look at the New York Times article about Smithfield overtaking the Eastern European pig market. I've always avoided pork when I visit my family in the US because of what they do in North Carolina and there is no way to tell from reading the pack where the pork comes from. Now I'll positively ban it! Surely this is a subject worth exploration in depth in Gourmet Magazine?

Posted 5/21/2009, 7:07:26pm by eg

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I am so proud of California for taking this step, but I agree with Zach above, that what is important is to ensure that lax enforcement and interpretation do not lay the groundwork for sloppy oversight. In my opinion, I believe that the further we as consumers have become with our food production/origins, the easier it has been for agriculture and livestock to be exploited. As consumers, we must take responsibility for holding both the producers and legislator's feet to the fire. It is OUR DEMAND that drives the market, and once again, when the market is driven by money, those at the bottom suffer. I dare say, that if time reversed and individuals were responsible for harvesting/slaying their own food, consumption habits would change dramatically, and awareness and pro-activity concerning animal welfare would increase exponentially--as would our life expectancy. Lorrie....<http://read-n-eat.com/>

Posted 5/20/2009, 4:56:59pm by LorrieK

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This is great news! I'm excited to see humane certifications start to trickle down to consumers beyond some of the niche specialty stores. I'm bringing about some cautious optimism though on Grandin's promises of oversight. I think we all remember the problems with Aurora's interpretation of "access to pasture" in the past, and I hope we have the regulatory power to make sure these lax interpretations do not happen in the future.

Posted 5/20/2009, 11:25:58am by ZachRI

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