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Some longtime vegetarians are returning to meat, but only with sustainably raised, grass-fed livestock like these cows at Ghent, N.Y.'s Hawthorne Valley Farm

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No More Sacred Cows

By Jennie Yabroff | NEWSWEEK Published Dec 31, 2009 From the magazine issue dated Jan 11, 2010

The latest cookbook by Mollie Katzen, author of vegetarian bibles The Moosewood Cookbook and The Enchanted Broccoli Forest, includes recipes for spinach lasagna and vegetable tofu stir fry with orange ginger glaze. It also includes a recipe for beef stew. No, not "beef" stew, in which some soy-based protein substitute is dressed and spiced to look (and sort of taste) like meat. Beef stew. With real beef. From a cow.

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Considered one of the chefs most responsible for the mainstreaming of vegetarianism in the 1970s and '80s, and a vegetarian herself for 30 years, Katzen began eating meat again a few years ago. "Somehow it got ascribed to me that I don't want people to eat meat," Katzen said. "I've just wanted to supply possibilities that were low on the food chain."

For as long as people have been forswearing meat, they've also been sneaking the occasional corn dog. The difference is, vegetarians used to feel guilty about their sins of the flesh-consumption. Now, thanks to the cachet attached to high-end meat, they are having their burgers without sacrificing the moral high ground.

The word "flexitarian," meaning someone who mostly eats vegetarian with the occasional cheesesteak thrown in, has been around for a while. But only recently have former vegetarians been so smug about their forays to the dark side. "There is something almost primal about it," writes lapsed vegetarian Tara Austen Weaver, describing her first meat-buying expedition in The Butcher and the Vegetarian. "I haven't actually hunted dinner myself, but I set my sights and claimed the prize I sought." The "primalness" of the meat-eating (or meat-purchasing) experience comes up a lot in these conversion narratives, which inevitably take place at a quaint, family-run butcher shop. Some of these shops are even run by former vegetarians and vegans, such as Fleisher's, the upstate New York store where Julie Powell (of Julie and Julia fame) learned to carve up a steer for her forthcoming Cleaving.

Buying only grass-fed, sustainably raised (and incredibly expensive) meat allows former vegetarians to maintain the same sanctimony they expressed with their old "I don't eat anything with a face" T shirts. In response to an article by Jonathan Safran Foer about his decision to give up meat, a Brooklyn meat moralist wrote, "lovingly raised meat is not as hard to find as [Safran Foer] seems to think—at least not if you have the good fortune to live near a farmers' market. Almost all the sheep and cattle and most of the pigs and chickens raised by the farmers who sell at those markets have spent their lives in the fields, free to run, graze and root as their natures dictate." This is the argument used by born-again carnivores like Katzen: eating meat is not ethically wrong. Eating ethically wrong meat (i.e., the cheap, mass-processed, hormone-stuffed burgers and steaks that constitute 80 percent of the meat sold in the U.S.) is wrong.

While it's true that sustainably raised, grass-fed beef may be better for the consumer, it's hard to argue that it's ultimately better for the cow. What these steak apologists seem to be missing is that no matter how "lovingly" the cow was raised, no matter how much grazing or rooting he did in his life, he gave up that life to become their dinner. Carnivores who only ate the flesh of animals that had died of natural causes at the end of long, satisfying lives might have a claim to moral superiority, but what to call them? Corpsevores? And if these organic farm animals have such great lives, isn't the more humane thing to eat a cage-raised, industrially processed chicken? At least we'd be putting it out of its misery.

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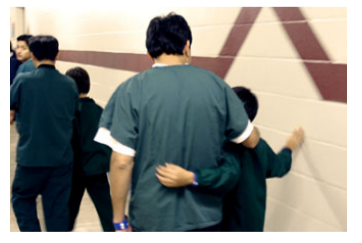
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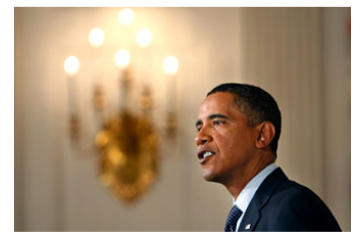
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