

A MINDFUL CARNIVORE

Thoughts and stories from a vegan-turned-hunter



This meat or that?

Jan 1st, 2010 by Tovar.

“Is this venison?”

Our friend had just spooned several meatballs onto his plate. I replied that yes, indeed, it was. Sensing an edge to the question, I decided not to elaborate on how I'd shot the five-point buck within a half-mile of the house that November.



“I don't mind,” he said and nodded toward his wife, to whom he was about to pass the serving bowl. She did mind.

She didn't comment. She just passed on the meatballs. And she is no vegetarian. I didn't inquire into her reasons, but the moment got me thinking.

I know a lot of meat-eaters who won't eat wild game. Maybe they don't like the flavor (or think they don't). Maybe they don't like the idea of eating a species for which they have a particular Disneyfied fondness—deer, say. Maybe they believe industrial beef is safer or healthier than meat processed in a hunter's kitchen. Or maybe they just don't like hunting.

But here's the thing. I know other people—some of them near-vegetarians—who won't eat any meat *except* wild game. Or who will only eat meat—wild or domestic—if they know how the animal lived and died.

I find the contrast intriguing.

Personally, I prefer to know the origins of my meat. I hunt, aiming to kill with swift mercy.

When the gods of the hunt smile on me and a deer comes my way, I'm always shocked by the immediacy of the encounter with the death that sustains life.

And Cath and I buy locally-raised chickens, some of them raised by [fellow ex-vegetarians](#). We don't buy meat from who-knows-where.



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If you're an omnivore, do you like to know as much as possible about your meat, even to the point of knowing what the animal's face looked like? Or would you rather it be anonymously churned out by the Big Meat Factory in the Sky? Do you care about the dignity of the animal's life and death, its ecological footprint, or the attitude of the person who raised or hunted it?

If you're a vegetarian, do certain kinds of meat seem more acceptable to you than others?

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Drew

January 1, 2010 at 8:28 pm

There's a certain comfort in killing... if I have done so cleanly and for clean purpose then my conscious is clean. It is to me undeniably a part of who we are and I think must be...The venison in my freezer is blood I know. The beef wrapped in cellophane in the store freezer is blood I do not know.



Tovar

January 2, 2010 at 2:05 pm

Well said, Drew.



Heather

January 2, 2010 at 11:48 am

As much as i love animals, i've always believed people should be allowed to hunt, provided they eat what they catch (rather than just hunting for fun/"sport"). It seems that, if you have the stomach to track it down and take it's life, you're worthy of eating it. I've often thought that i'd like to try hunting, but I'm not sure I've got the stomach for it. But i do feel that meat you've hunted yourself is somehow a more valid choice than animals raised in a pen and bought at a store.

Great blog, Tovar! 😊



Tovar

January 2, 2010 at 2:05 pm

Thanks, Heather.

It took me over three years of hunting—and a couple of days of being with the emotional aftermath of my first deer kill—to know whether I had the stomach for it. Now, a few years later, it's still a somewhat uncertain experience. I always have a couple of shaky days after killing a deer.



Howling Duck Ranch

January 7, 2010 at 10:22 pm

You know, I got my first moose this year. I only had one tiny, fleeting moment when I looked into his dead eye of, I'm not even sure what emotion to put to the feeling, perhaps sadness that this young bull had lost his life to me. But, the moment we got him hooked up and rolled over to begin the field dressing process, he was suddenly nothing more than meat for my freezer.

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cheers,

Kristeva Dowling
Howling Duck Ranch



Eric Nuse

January 2, 2010 at 8:54 pm

I have three daughters, two of which have gone thru the vegetarian phase. All of them prefer wild game to anything except possibly home raised organic. If your going to eat meat, wild game is the original organic, free ranging and local. Not to mention it tastes great and should have a great story to go with it!



John Barbano

January 2, 2010 at 11:51 pm

Drew, Heather, Eric ... (and Tovar)

I do understand and support your position, the basis of which is sound , "just", honorable and admirable.

For those "urbanites" whose lifestyles don't necessarily allow the time (and in addition in my case, the patience) for "the hunt" but still want to consume many kinds of meats, the practical choices ALMOST means we need to consume the normal store bought "stuff".

I also know I would not want to/nor could kill an animal such as a deer myself — in my younger days I think I could, but now, not so much.

So I guess then people like me need to re-define "the hunt". So the hunt now becomes me caring enough and investing time to find (hunt) stores or private parties like Tovar who I could purchase the meat from, who I know took great care in the hunt with the objective to kill quickly and mercifully. So there is an answer here ... but the key question is will I (and others like me) spend the time to do that "hunt"?

Now Tovar to answer your questions very honestly:

Do you like to know as much as possible about your meat, even to the point of knowing what the animal's face looked like? Or would you rather it be anonymously churned out by the Big Meat Factory in the Sky?

**** I don't want to know the animal's face – Bambi is too cute, my conscience would not favor this option 😊

**** For me, I would rather it be anonymously delivered

**** As far as a big meat factory: well, I know I would not like it if I saw it, but I guess I don't want to face the facts of that.

Do you care about the dignity of the animal's life and death, its ecological footprint, or the attitude of the person who raised or hunted it?

**** Yes, indeed .. cruelty to an animal's precious life would tick me off – the ecological footprint is of importance.

Regards, John



Tovar

January 3, 2010 at 7:44 am

John, thanks for your honest, thoughtful reply.

You're right: respectful hunting is certainly not the only good way to procure meat. And I like your suggestion about re-defining the hunt; it's giving me "food for thought" for another post in the weeks to come.



John Barbano

January 4, 2010 at 11:03 pm



Great, I am glad I gave you some "food for thought"... I look forward to the next

topic... eat on pilgrim!



Diane Bonaccorsi

January 3, 2010 at 10:00 am

Thanks for this blog. It is most thought provoking. I eat meat but I don't ever cook it in my house. (my husband's request that we never cook meat in the house we built). If i cooked it, I would only get meat that was local and organic. Buying local gives you a chance to know the farmer and their practices. I never liked game, but have not had it for years. Your blog has me thinking about whether or not I really don't like it or that I just convinced myself I don't like it. I may have reacted as your friend did. Thanks for helping me to think differently on this subject.



Tovar

January 7, 2010 at 5:20 pm

I hope the game you try is prepared deliciously!



NorCal Cazadora

January 6, 2010 at 11:16 pm

Tovar: Fantastic new blog! I'm really looking forward to following this.

One of the most common rationales I hear from people who have no problem eating farmed (factory or otherwise) meat but object to hunting is this: "Farm animals were BORN to become our meat. Those wild animals would still be alive if it weren't for you and your gun."

The parallels in this argument to our former rationalization for black slavery are kind of alarming. The pig born in a box deserves to die; the pig in the wild deserves to be not only free, but free from human predation. Huh?

I think it's just 10,000 years of brainwashing by the vested interests of agriculture. "There's something wrong with that meat. It's unsafe and unsavory. Come eat what we've raised for you instead..."

John Barbano: As an urbanite hunter, I sympathize with you. I have to drive 1-4 hours to most of my hunting grounds, which detracts from the green aspect of hunting. And honestly, it's expensive and time-consuming – I've sacrificed many other aspects of my life to do it. But I think there are a lot of other respectable sources of meat. Find a local producer of pastured meat and visit his/her farm – that's a huge step toward connection with your food. Or raise some backyard chickens. Anti-chicken regulations in many cities are loosening up because of the growing demand for meat that won't kill us with e coli.



Tovar

January 7, 2010 at 10:22 am

Holly (NorCal), thanks for your comments!

Yes, there definitely is a strange bifurcation in much modern thinking about domesticated animals vs. wild animals. I think we owe respect to both.

Your blog looks great, too. I'll be following along.



Howling Duck Ranch

January 7, 2010 at 10:28 pm

Wow, never before have I heard the argument put that way (that farm animals were born to be our meat but that wild ones would still be alive if it weren't for you and your gun)! This could only be put forth by someone who doesn't have any idea of the suffering that 'our meat' animals endure during their short pitiful 'lives' (I struggle to even say life in this context).

Funny to hear it put that wild meat is unsavory in light of the times and all the public health scares of late!

cheers,

Kristeva Dowling
Howling Duck Ranch



NorCal Cazadora

January 8, 2010 at 3:56 pm

Sadly, I've heard it a lot, and the statistics suggest it may not be that uncommon: Between 18 and 20 percent of Americans disapprove of hunting, but only 3.2 percent don't eat meat. Some of that may be antipathy toward hunters and some of our worst behaviors, but I believe much of that is just hypocrisy (or willful ignorance).

The other funny thing about attitudes toward wild meat is this bizarre belief that wild animals are filled with disease simply because they're wild. I actually had a guy in an internet discussion tell me one day that hunted meat is potentially dangerous because it wasn't produced in a USDA-inspected facility. I had to remind him about all the deaths from e coli-laden burgers that you hear about constantly, and asked if he could cite one hunter death from eating wild game. Conversation over.



Arthur

January 7, 2010 at 2:15 pm

First off, I'm loving the blog already.

As to your question, though, I would be lying if I said I didn't ever eat store-bought meat. I do. But there is something magical about eating meat that you have provided through your own skill and hard-work. It's a great feeling.

Plus, just knowing how the animal was cared for – from shot-placement to meat preparation – is awesome. If it's an animal I've killed, I know for sure how that meat was handled from start to finish.

I definitely can't say that about a steak picked up at the store.



Tovar

January 7, 2010 at 5:31 pm

Hey, Arthur, I'm glad you like it!

I'm not a purist, either. Though the only flesh foods in our freezer right now are venison (from local woods) and poultry (from local operations, some of it bought in the store), I don't turn up my nose at anything that other folks cook! Plus, as of welcoming a dog into our family a few years ago, we buy dog food; healthy and good-quality though it is, some of its ingredients definitely qualify as meat from who-knows-where.

I'm with you on the feeling of going through the whole process, from the clean kill to the grinding of the burger.



Suburban Bushwacker

January 7, 2010 at 6:38 pm

Tovar

I saw holly's mention of your blog and wandered over and as usual Holly's recommendation counts for a lot. I was a food fadist for a while and am [slowly] moving towards a more honest relationship with my dinner. I look forward to hearing more from you in the coming months.

Regards
SBW



Tovar

January 7, 2010 at 7:12 pm

Thanks for stopping by, SBW!



Clyde

January 8, 2010 at 9:03 am

As a vegetarian who's well aware of how meat arrives at the table, I admit that I used to have a greater respect for hunting because of its seeming lack of hypocrisy. I have had many hunting friends over the years, and we always had animated discussions about life, death and food sources. If you asked them, I believe they would all verify we had a mutual respect — they me for my commitment to vegetarianism, and me them for their honesty in acquiring their meat.

My perspective changed after I became a photographer, believe it or not. I picked up a camera gain in mid-life after putting down my SLR years before. Along with my telephoto lens came hours and even days in the wilderness with wildlife . . . areas where I'd previously camped or hiked. But with my camera, I became much more of an integrated observer.

And as an observer, immersed in worlds where hunters and non-hunters collide, I wish I could say that my experience of hunting was as clean and humane as you suggest. If it were, I might be writing today with a different perspective.

But I've seen all manner of wanton killing, injury and — if I can be so bold — torture. Some of what I've seen is slaughter that emulates what I've also seen on factory farms when I was a young, committed vegan. No better, no worse. But it's all the same when it comes to the ignorance or (sadly) sometimes malice of the human heart.

I'm afraid there's really no turning someone like myself who's been on both sides of the issue. I do respect those hunters I meet who have a solid code of ethics when it comes to their treatment of animals and the reasons they hunt.

But when I'm out there in that silent space with the wild animals I've come to respect so tremendously, gunshots breaking the silence evoke as much antipathy as do the sounds of the trucks pulling into the slaughterhouse near where I used to live. It's all the same to me. I wish it weren't.



Tovar

January 8, 2010 at 9:52 am

I really appreciate your comment, Clyde.

At the moment, I must be brief, as I have to run in a minute. In short, I agree with you. Both domestic and wild animals can be treated with respect. And both can be treated horribly. For me, one of the hardest parts of being a hunter is knowing what ignorant and malicious acts are committed by some hunters.

That's all I have time for just now. Thanks again.



Tovar

January 8, 2010 at 3:12 pm

P.S. In my haste, I wasn't as clear as I might have been, Clyde.

To a certain degree, I can make my peace with abstractly "knowing" about poor hunter behavior. Logically, my mind knows that being a hunter doesn't make me responsible for the worst acts that hunters can muster, just as being a driver doesn't make me responsible for the reckless highway activities of other drivers.

But when I see first-hand evidence of hunters' callous disrespect of animals—or hear credible stories of such—my heart and soul are deeply disturbed. I don't yet have words for all the reasons this is so.

I'll have to more to say on this in future posts, I'm sure.



Clyde

January 9, 2010 at 2:47 am

Thanks for the kind reply, Tovar. The most common replies I get when I bring up some of the things I've witnessed are usually rationalizations for why it's okay to treat animals as such. I've heard everything from how highly-sophisticated animals have "reduced nerve impulses" (despite many mammal's near identical nervous system constructs), religious justifications for treatment of the 'beasts,' philosophical explanations for how our superiority as a species affords free will in our treatment of them, and so forth. It's with genuine respect that I thank you for even entertaining

a concept that I realize can cause much ire among hunters. I suspect there are issues we vegetarians are reticent to address as well, although I personally tend to see adversarial positions sometimes as a way to grow to a new understanding. I think everyone, to be proverbial, has at least a piece of that log in their eye.

A lot of people who slaughter animals or who hunt for food seem to think that those of us who are vegetarians come by this philosophical stance by way of ignorance and lack of experience. I doubt very much you share that perspective, having been a vegetarian yourself. I know many vegetarians who don't eat meat, precisely because they've been formed by painful experiences vis-a-vis the suffering of animals. That was certainly my path, forced to be part of some horrors of slaughter at a young age. Having formed relationships with many types of animals throughout my life, younger and older — and understanding the animals' personalities and sensitivities, I realized one day that if I were to kill one of these birds or animals for a meal, I would have — at most — a half hour of pleasure in my dining room. A half hour in exchange for erasing the complex emotional life I'd come to know in the presence of this living being. A being with evolved characteristics that are sometimes denied in the interest of retaining that wall between the them and the us. So some may call that naive, in that I'm ascribing some level of sophistication to a non-human animal. Frankly, I believe that someday our understanding will evolve to a point where we will make these equivalencies between humans and non-humans more easily — and look back on these times as genuine dark ages of understanding when it comes to species distinction.

That being said, I've tried to accommodate the fact that others do not share my philosophical or intellectual stance, even as it pains me tremendously to witness cruelty that will undoubtedly persist until the end of my lifetime. But I do believe there's a middle ground that ought to be consistently addressed by all of us, and that is the intent and context of any harm we inflict. It's why in reading a blog like yours, I'm gratified to hear of your commitment — to paraphrase Hippocrates — do the least harm. In my mind, there is absolutely no excuse for letting an animal suffer when mercy is the alternative. Just none. Because hunting is by its very nature a mission to kill (for myriad reasons, I understand) it brings with it an exceptionally high level of moral culpability as I see it. It's a deliberate act to harm and I believe anyone who undertakes that act has a moral imperative to show compassion and acute judgment before striking in any form. I believe the same of any industry or pursuit in which we humans utilize non-humans for our purposes. When we have the power to issue a thumbs up or thumbs down on another's life, my personal belief is that we should hold that power sacred and use it with benevolence as a primary consideration.



Tovar

January 9, 2010 at 8:45 am

Well put, Clyde.

You and I agree in many ways. It's tempting for all of us—hunters, non-hunting meat-eaters, and vegetarians—to deny uncomfortable truths and to defend our positions by coming up with all kinds of justifications. I think all of us can benefit from reflecting more deeply and honestly on our relationships with animals and nature; at least as importantly, animals and nature can benefit from us doing that.

Yes, having been one myself, I have a lot of respect for most vegetarians and their reasons for making that dietary choice.

And I agree with you about the moral responsibility that comes with hunting, the need for both compassion and "acute judgment," and the sacredness of the power to kill or let live.

I'm grateful to have you as part of this conversation.



T. Michael Riddle

January 8, 2010 at 1:11 pm

Hi Tovar,
Just as SBW has stated I came over here via Holly and am not disappointed in the slightest degree!

I will definitely come by and visit more often if I am welcome to do so 😊



Tovar

January 9, 2010 at 8:47 am

Glad you stopped by, TMR. I'll be visiting your neck of the virtual woods, too. Cheers!