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They eat horses, don't they?

By Susanna Forrest

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Our industrialised food chain throws up the occasional surprise: mad cows, deadly eggs, cornflakes that look like Jesus. A few scraps of stray DNA from a meat-producing animal should be the least worrying component of budget processed nuggets, but when news broke that "beef" burgers sold in Tesco, Lidl, Iceland, Dunnes Stores and Aldi had been found to contain horse DNA, and Britain and Ireland got up on their hind legs.

The source was traced to a processor called Silvercrest Foods in County Monaghan, in horse-loving Ireland. This leaves us to reflect on the irony that the number of horses slaughtered in Ireland has risen from 822 in 2006 to 7,000 in 2010-11, thanks to the recession, and to the four new equine slaughterhouses that have been built in the republic in the same period. Most of these carcasses have been exported to Europe. In the circuitous, globe-trotting style of today's food industry, perhaps the horses that arrived in County Monaghan under the guise of "beef product" were coming home.

Hypocrisy is the shameful twin of our Anglo-Saxon disgust for the consumption of horse flesh. Today one billion people eat horse meat. It is commonly served in China, Russia, Central Asia, Mexico, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Japan, Belgium and Argentina. Globally, consumption has risen by 27.6 per cent since 1990. Meanwhile, Britain, Australia, Ireland and America are busy expressing disgust at our hippophagic cousins while merrily shipping our unwanted horses overseas to be turned into bresaola and sauerbraten.

Horse meat has a history as long and as contradictory as humans. Mankind has spent hundreds of thousands of years eating horses, and only 5,000 years befriending them. Pope Gregory III was late in closing the stable door in 732AD when he decreed that hippophagy was an unclean, pagan practice of German barbarians. This notion took time to catch on in the British Isles: 400 years later a Christian scribe, Gerald of Wales, was horrified to see an Ulster king bathe in a broth made of a sacrificed mare – probably not far from Monaghan. This Us vs Them distinction was a useful way to define Christian civilisation against the Barbarian hordes who menaced it, galloping into town with a bow in one hand and a horse kebab in the other.

Horses were also useful for combat against these outsiders, whether they were North African Muslims or Ottoman Turks. Anthropologist Marvin Harris points out the economic and martial motive behind Pope Gregory's ban: it's best not to eat expensive military technology.

Come the 18th century, the horse had a new enemy: rationalism. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution everything came into question, including the special status of the horse. In 1807 Napoleon's surgeon-in-chief noticed that wounded soldiers who ate horse meat scavenged from the battlefield not only thrived, but also became immune to scurvy. He gave orders for horse soup to be prepared, laced with gunpowder, and served in hospitals. He wrote of his success to the learned gentlemen of Paris, suggesting the adoption of horse as red meat for working men.

By the 20th century many British towns had horse meat butchers to supply "kicker eaters" (Yorkshire slang for hippophagists). In Sheffield, in Aberdeen, beef was not the only red meat on offer. It had to be sold with clear labelling and new shops made the national newspapers,

but it was openly available. Like whale meat, it was seen as a cheap cut, and, although debate raged on, had some popularity in wartime.

And yet the horse's lot was changing once more. As the number of working horses tumbled, following World War Two, so the horse moved further from being livestock and closer to being a pet and friend. British appetites fell away as images of horses being shipped to the continent for slaughter reached the public. A mid 1980s scare over trichomoniasis contamination only reinforced sentiments: there was something shameful about eating horses.

Today, most leisure horses are treated with drugs that make them unsafe for human consumption under EU regulations, and nobody is rushing to produce grass-fed, happy organic horses for renegade foodies in the British market.

Meanwhile, we'll keep on sending our four-legged friends over the Channel for those barbarians to eat with garlic, until the next time we find ourselves in a cheap-meat nightmare.

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