

Horse butchers

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by Marie Chemorin

It all happened just over a year ago. France was still reeling from the shock of the hurricane that had devastated the country and the oil slick poisoning the Atlantic coasts. But life continued, and the upsets were soon forgotten. In those dark days, a small publishing house suggested I should write a cookery book to be published in a vaguely comic series.

As an ethnologist and professional chef, it was inconceivable for me to write a book of traditional recipes. There are already so very many. What else could I possibly add? So I decided to turn the situation on its head and ask the French people, gourmets or otherwise, a simple question, "Is there a cookery book you would never dare open?" Silence. No one could imagine a disgusting book about cookery. A total blank. Without even knowing why, I made a suggestion, "What if I wrote a book about horsemeat?" Hostile reactions. "You can't do a thing like that". "You have no right to do anything of the sort". "Do that and I'll never speak to you again". I must confess that these animated reactions worried me.

Cannibals

So, like a good ethnologist I had found the right topic. A culinary taboo still exists among the French people I know, horses. The reasons for this repugnance were all very similar – the horse is a noble animal, horses are man's best friend, and so on.

As far as the printed page is concerned, there simply were no books on the subject. Recipes for horsemeat are rare and are relegated to the end of books about meat in general. What's more, they all date back to the 1960s. Gleaning information here and there, I have learned that from a historical point of view the consumption of horsemeat has never been a simple matter. Horses were eaten long before they became domestic animals. The discovery of carved horse bones under the rock of Salustré proves that our prehistoric ancestors ate horses, as well as reindeer and bison. In his book *De l'animal à l'Assiette*, Jean Marie Bourre tells us that in ancient Rome horses were sacrificed to the gods, especially in March to favor a good harvest. The meat of the slaughtered animals was consumed during ceremonies while the head was crowned with sprigs of wheat and displayed at the main gate of the city. The author adds that during the conquest of Gaul,



Julius Caesar's troops longed for horsemeat above all else. And let's not forget Attila and his Huns, always top of the list when illustrating barbaric eating habits, who ate the animals they rode and drank their blood.

These beloved animals had therefore been eaten for centuries before the Middle Ages when popes Gregory III and Zachary I decided to ban the consumption of horse and beaver (!) meat, under threat of heavy penalties. History neglects to explain the reason for this sudden ban by the Church, but officially horsemeat could no longer be eaten on a daily basis, except in cases of *force majeure*.

Boutiques hippophagiques

Starving soldiers dying from the cold in their worn, cloth cloaks during Napoleon's Russian campaign were the first to butcher their faithful companions, like the survivors of an air crash lost in the jungle and forced to feed on the flesh of their dead companions in order to survive. Ashamed and disgusted, they did it just the same. Later, this sacrilege occurred again. In 1870 during the siege of Paris, the citizens queuing in front of empty butchers' shops began to fill their wretched pans with mice, cats, dogs, and even horses, to the extent that they developed a taste for horse meat. Years later when the war was over, and the dead were buried, the survivors changed the rules and added man's best friend to the menu *du jour*. Horsemeat was odd and slightly sweet, a cross between game and beef. The sages of the era said their piece too, praising the nutritional qualities of horsemeat and emphasizing the fact that it contained no parasites and could therefore be eaten raw. The only reservation was that it did not keep long and had to be eaten quickly.

It was during this period that the first horse butcher's opened, selling only horsemeat. Particular care was taken over the aesthetic side of this new business. Horse butcher's shops looked like small but magnificent light-colored marble temples, with a blood-red window and a gold-painted horse's head hanging above the door. These unusual retail outlets were called "boutiques hippophagiques" to avoid confusion with beef butchers.

Although the shops clearly looked different, the terms used to describe the cuts of horsemeat were borrowed from the terminology of beef. A roasting joint, of course, and fillet, steak on the bone, cutlets, shoulder and so on. Was this simply a lack of imagination, or a device adopted to avoid confusing consumers and promote the consumption of horsemeat? Be that as it may, the animals sold were not just any old nags. Horsemeat was already good to eat when the animal was three or four years old but was considered to be really delicious at about seven. Foals and mares were also comestible, as were donkeys, their meat made aromatic by the herbs they grazed in the fields.

After the Second World War, and in the 1960s and 1970s, horse butchers made their fortune. Horsemeat had a good reputation. It was cheap, lean and nourishing. Children were supposed to eat at least one horse steak per week. Horsemeat always bleeds bright red blood. In France the butcher wraps it in the famous pink paper, with a picture of a magnificent stallion, its mane blowing in the wind, looking you right in the eye as if to

say, “Eat horse meat and you’ll be strong and proud like me”. Some liked the blood from horsemeat but others found it disgusting.

The end of a trend

Today, there are barely thirty horse butchers in Paris, including the market stalls. But as you walk through the city, you can identify many others by their gray marble façade with its red stripes, which is all that remains of the former butcher’s shops. Only the insignia is missing, that golden horse’s head, no doubt sold on to antique dealers. The butcher’s shops have become offices or homes, and the moment of glory enjoyed by horsemeat butchers has passed. They have either gone bankrupt or continue to work with nostalgia for a golden age that will never return.

One butcher in his ascetic shop in the XVIII arrondissement of Paris, told me, “Once there were ten of us in this street, now there are only two. Horsemeat used to be the people’s food because it was cheap. There was a queue outside the shop. Then horsemeat became hard to get and expensive”. What the butcher asked me not to mention was that epidemics of trichinosis among horses in the 1970s did little to help. Like others before him, he preferred to be angry about what he considered to be the low profile image unfairly attributed to his product. “Anyway, people don’t want to eat horse meat anymore. They say it’s a crime to eat these animals! I don’t understand it. Do I look like a murderer? Any more than a tripe seller or a beef butcher? They don’t like us much either. They despise us. They think we’re too sophisticated, I suppose. Well, to tell the truth we don’t like them either, they’re just peasants”.

It is true that once upon a time a horse butcher could strut around, his head held high, in his very stylish shop, as sparsely furnished as the house in Jacques Tati’s film *Mon Oncle*. Horse butchers also boasted that they did not simply carve up animals. Horsemeat is full of sinew so to make it edible, it has to be cut up using little pointed knives and almost surgically precise movements. You can tell a good butcher from the way he slices the meat to make it tender. “You cut a horse up from the head down towards the tail. That’s the proper way. Then you remove the inedible sinew. Using thin, bendy knives, you cut up the pieces one by one. It’s a long job. A real piece of surgery. The meat is lovely – red, smooth and tender. The oddest to deal with when you are removing the sinew is in the rump steak, the bit we call the ‘wallet’ because it opens up just like a purse. But the best part in my opinion is the ‘surprise’, the equivalent of a shoulder of beef but smooth, even silky”.

I move on to another, equally austere butcher’s in the same district, where I find a more jovial, less pessimistic butcher. There is no meat on display. Preserved products are arranged elegantly in the window, including donkey salami, horse sausages, horse mortadella, smoked horse meat and dry horsemeat sausages. Customers who love this sort of product can order very expensive – and very hard to find – cooked horse meat ham. The meat is kept in the refrigerators. The price list hangs on the wall and an advertisement shows a boy smiling as he praises the various merits of horsemeat. Next to the door, protected by a plastic cover, is an article written by a top chef, again praising horsemeat to the skies. The regulars parade in and out politely. One grandmother

demands her hamburger. A young woman comes in to leave an order. “Will you have some chainette by Monday? It’s just like lace”, she says to me. “It’s really nice. The kids want it every Monday, in the frying pan with fried potatoes. Delicious!” One after the other they come in, never staying long but just leaving their orders. Gourmets with a horse butcher’s nearby must plan their menus in advance. The butcher is friendly, making comments on the best cuts, suggesting recipes, hinting that horsemeat goes well with sweet and sour flavors.

When I express a desire to visit a farm and abattoir, his smile disappears. “That’s difficult! I never go myself. I always send someone else. You shouldn’t even talk about it unless you want trouble with Brigitte Bardot”. I insist, and ask where the animals come from. The butcher becomes even more reticent and the mystery deepens. “I only buy American meat, which is red and firm. In butchering terms we call it ‘well-structured’, the best you can get. Out of a thousand animals, only the American ones are really worth buying. But they don’t eat horsemeat in America. They raise horses for foreigners. German and Canadian animals aren’t bad either but don’t even think about buying Polish horses, they stink of fish and they are a light bluish chocolate sort of color. In France, we eat working horses and sometimes – but don’t tell anyone this either – riding horses that have reached the end of their career. They’re delicious – smooth, placid meat because the horses have been pampered”.

Vegetarians from now on?

My investigation is over. After the storm and the oil slick, France was rocked by a food scare that drove us to distraction. Every morning we were served up increasingly alarmist information. The mad cow disease was followed by swine fever, then the epidemic of foot and mouth that meant English sheep had to be slaughtered by the truckload. And to cap it all, we were terrorized for a whole week by a mystery panic in which the serial killer this time was vacuum-packed pig’s tongue in gelatin. The suspicion was spreading. Pessimists claimed that a *Soylent Green* era was beginning, as in Richard Fleischer’s terrible sci-fi film of 1973, which describes a starving society that unwittingly eats its own dead. Even optimists turned vegetarian.

Then one morning, the butcher from the XVIII arrondissement happily informed me that sales had doubled.

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