

Where's My Beef (Coming From)?

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By Expat Chef

A pig walks into a spinach field in California. A two-year-old in Idaho dies. Somewhere a cow gives birth to an exact replica of its sire. We buy a new freezer.

How can these events be related? With a nod to Michael Pollan, let me trace the events back to the source.

On Sept. 20, 2006, Kyle Allgood of Boise, Idaho died from eating food contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7. Over 200 people in 26 states were sickened and two others died. This type of food poisoning is normally only associated with consumption of contaminated meat. The contaminated food source was spinach.

The spinach was grown in the Salinas Valley of California, and harvested just weeks earlier. It took a long time to trace the source of contamination. However, according to Dr. Reilly of the California Health Department, the outbreak was most likely caused when a feral pig walked into the spinach field after visiting a cattle feedlot nearby. The pig had the bacteria in its system and had carried on it some of the cattle manure from the feedlot.

The manure contained the virulent strain of *E. coli*, O157:H7, that is usually found in the intestines of cattle, sheep and goats who consume a grain-fed diet. This strain of *E. coli* evolved by surviving in the highly acidic digestive system of cattle in feedlots. Grain feeding increases the number of bacteria and its resistance to stomach acids according to recent research published in *Science*.

The high stomach acidity is not a normal condition for ruminants, but feed lot animals have to adapt in order to process a diet of corn instead of their natural diet of grass. The diet of the cattle and the living conditions in the feed lot also require heavy use of antibiotics in order to keep them healthy. As a result, antibiotic-resistant and virulent bacterial strains like *E. coli* O157:H7 develop.

The grain is part of the feed mix that has been developed for livestock to promote rapid growth. The feed also contains antibiotics, supplements, and animal by-products including chicken parts, feather meal and beef tallow.

Previously, the animal by-products included other beef sources besides tallow, but that practice is now banned due to the risk of Mad Cow Disease (BSE). However, that same feed, including the protein products cattle are banned from eating, is still fed to chickens and hogs.

According to Eric Schlosser, in his book *Fast Food Nation*, only 13 slaughterhouses process the majority of the beef consumed by 300 million Americans. Thus, if one portion of the meat is tainted, it becomes mixed with that of hundreds of other cattle processed that day and distributed throughout the U.S. This type of centralized processing, similar to that for the contaminated spinach, explains how one small portion of contaminated food can affect hundreds in different states across the nation.

The situation gets even more muddled when you mix in some politics as well. The current chief of staff at the Agriculture Department used to be the beef industry's chief lobbyist. The person who headed the Food and Drug Administration until recently used to be an executive at the National Food Processors Association.

Cutbacks in staff and budgets have reduced the number of food-safety inspections conducted by the F.D.A. to about 3,400 a year -- from 35,000 in the 1970s. The number of inspectors at the Agriculture Department has declined to 7,500 from 9,000.

A study published in *Consumer Reports* showed the impact of such cutbacks and lack of food policies: 83 percent of the broiler chickens purchased at supermarkets nationwide were found to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria.

Now, the same agency, the FDA, has decided for us that cloned meat is okay for human consumption. With no labeling required. So, you will never know if you are buying cloned meat, or not. Ironically, it was Upton Sinclair's exposure of meat-packing issues that precipitated both a meat inspection law and the law which created the FDA in order to protect consumers.

So, we bought a freezer. And we sourcing our meat locally. Grass-fed, antibiotic-free beef that lived on pasture (the way cattle should live), raised by people I know by name, and then were slaughtered in a humane and sanitary fashion.

While I can't help you with the freezer, I can point you toward some resources, and some question to ask to make sure you are getting your meats from the right source.

Places to Look:

Online you can find farms near you by searching at localharvest.org and sustainabletable.org. You can also ask restaurants who serve local produce and meats who their suppliers are, or try your local food circle or Slow Food convivium.

Questions to Ask

1. Was the animal raised on pasture? How much of the time?
2. Was the animal fed only grass? If not, what was it fed?
You want to be sure that the animal was not fed commercial feed containing animal by-products including those from cattle, supplements or poultry manure and feather meal. If the animal was fed grain, you want to ask how much of the animal's diet was grain and what types. Corn is the hardest for cattle to digest, but it is the cheapest grain, so it is commonly fed to cattle in feed lots. Cattle fed grain only often get sick.
3. How was the animal "finished," was it ever in a feedlot?
The term finishing refers to a period of time prior to slaughter where cattle are often fed grain in order to promote marbling (fat) in the meat and weight gain. Cattle are often confined to feed lots during the finishing period. You will want to ask if the animal was in a feed lot and for how long, and under what conditions.
4. Was the animal grain-supplemented?
Some sustainable farmers will provide various grains to cattle along with grasses in order to promote growth, but the animals are not forced to eat the grain, and are allowed to eat grasses along with the grains. It is important to ask how old the beef was before it was started on grain. Calves' stomachs are not mature enough to digest grain, it is best to wait until the animal is near 18 months old before starting on grain.
5. Was the animal ever given antibiotics?
Antibiotics promote growth and allow cattle to eat an all-grain diet without getting sick. Some researchers believe that the overuse of antibiotics will foster the development of highly resistant "superbugs" similar to *E. coli* O157:H7.
6. Was the animal ever given steroids, hormones or other growth promoters?
The answer to this should be no. If it is not, you should look for another source for your meats.
7. Finally, ask if you can visit the farm and see how the animals are raised for yourself.

