

# WHAT'S THE BEEF WITH horsemeat

**Xaq Frohlich** breaks down Europe's latest worries about its food supply.

Once again Europe, and especially the UK, is reeling from a food scandal. On 15 January 2013 tests by the Irish Food Safety Authority revealed that frozen burgers sold by major retailers in Ireland and the UK contained horse DNA. Since then, we continue to learn each week of some new indignity – another product, household brand name or retailer – in Britain or elsewhere – testing positive for horsemeat, while companies and public institutions take measures to try to mitigate the damage.

## I'm shocked, shocked to find there's horsemeat in my food!

Certain themes in the horsemeat case seem to transcend the particulars of the scandal.

Predictably, in an economic crisis and period of substantial government cuts, many are asking, what responsibility public regulatory institutions bear in protecting the public from this kind of fraud. Within days of the discovery the Labour Party was asking whether deregulation was to blame for the latest lapse or “gaps in regulation”.

Another interesting feature of the UK scandal has been the prominent role of supermarkets. Since the BSE scare of the 1990s, British supermarkets have been especially active, arguably draconian, in implementing strict standards for product quality assurance (Freidberg, 2004). Anyone familiar with the UK's socioeconomic hierarchy of supermarkets will know that, the fact the initial product singled out was sold at Tesco's and Lidl and not, say, Waitrose was significant. Supermarkets in the UK follow a market segmentation where Waitrose targets the high end, quality-conscious customer while Tesco's and Lidl aim for the mid-range and price-conscious consumers. To what extent is this fraud a predictable consequence of retailer price wars, driving down the price and with it quality?

The meat industry's reliance on private, market-based regulation raises other questions: must the risk for such fraud fall most heavily at the socioeconomic bottom end? Is hidden horsemeat limited to low end, highly processed convenience food, or does it reach into high end cuts of meat? How many of us are seeking reassurance in the conceit that we don't

buy frozen minced meat and are therefore unlikely to have eaten horse? (A friend of mine in England said the scandal turned “real” for her when Waitrose, where she shops, had to withdraw its meatballs.)

But perhaps the scandal's most defining feature is its continual expansion. It starts with frozen burger patties from the Irish supplier Silvercrest. Then it appears the patties were procured from Poland. Next it's Findus ready meals of lasagne from French supplier Comigel, itself supplied by another French company purchasing from a dodgy Dutch meat trader fencing horsemeat from a Romanian abattoir. Burger King finds traces in its burgers. Nestlé removes Buitoni pasta sold in Spain and Italy but sourced from a German supplier. And – gasp! – it's even in IKEA's famous Swedish meatballs.

The fraud has revealed broad transnational linkages across the industry. Initially, talk surrounding the scandal had the familiar tenor of nationalist protectionism – not in our meat! This quickly fell to the sober recognition that, for these products, there is no distinct “Ireland”, “UK”, “Poland” or even “Europe”. It is a “pandemic” of horsemeat in all of our beef and, given the number of countries and variety of product lines involved, it is difficult to trace a simple linear story of how it got from here to there. The horsemeat scandal has become another opportunity to reopen the question of what exactly is meant by the European “common” market: is defining a common market really a political choice, or are companies and their transnational food chains making that decision for us?

One explanation for the wide fallout zone is vertical and horizontal concentration in the food industry. As companies have acquired product lines and brands, they have increased not only their market shares but also their exposure to the risk of scandal. Another explanation is that nobody was really testing for horse DNA before. Now that they are, we are discovering what is in fact a common form of food fraud everywhere. Neither explanation is comforting to the consumer, whatever you think about eating horses.

## Animal to edible

What counts as food and therefore “good to eat” has long been a question of interest to social scientists

particularly anthropologists. It is not enough that it be edible. We hear a chorus of commentary stating that horsemeat is edible, even a delicacy, and that much of the current sensationalist journalism surrounding the scandal reflects a particularly British discomfort or squeamishness with eating horsemeat. That hippophagy is not uncommon in other countries, including many European ones implicated in the scandal, some say, is evidence that Brits should get over it, or get outside their comfort zone.

This kind of food relativism is beside the point. Many find eating horsemeat reprehensible. It is not so difficult to find cultures where eating cat or dog meat is acceptable, not to mention a thriving niche trade in bush meat, but I would hope it is not necessary to explain why finding them in one's food might be justifiably upsetting if it has been misrepresented. One also sees in such arguments the contours of a defence for eating GM foods or any of the many odd industrial substances that appear in our processed foods: if it's edible, why not eat it? Why should culture matter?

The appearance of pig DNA in early reports of “tainted meat” reminds us that such indiscriminate meat mixing can, in fact, violate religious scriptures – to do so is not kosher or halal. Why are some kinds of cultural taboos considered legitimate, but others not? Many people are certainly more worried about some animals as meat than others. For the past year, exposé after exposé has uncovered fraud at fish markets, that a lot of fish labelled “red snapper” or “tuna”, for example, was actually some other lesser fish. Just as DNA testing is revolutionising legal standards of guilt, it appears to be spawning a cottage industry for faux food debunkers out to shame the industry.

These fish exposés haven't exactly “hit the public in the stomach”, to paraphrase Upton Sinclair, the same way red meat scandals do. This difference is not only a post mad cow thing; there is something about eating certain animals that makes us particularly anxious. In her book *Animal to Edible* on French abattoirs, anthropologist Noëlle Vialles (1994) argues convincingly that a great deal of backstage effort goes into making the meat we buy a clean edible substance, rather than a messy animal flesh. Scandals like this serve as a reminder of the disturbing violent histories of our steaks and burgers.

There is also a significant distinction to draw between eating cuts of meat, which necessarily come from one animal, and eating minced meat, whose source could be multiple. There are perennial anxieties about “mystery meat” though it is worth remembering that it, too, has its proponents in Spam, not to mention hot dogs or sausages. One need not look far back to recall public outcry over “pink slime”. It is more difficult to trace where minced meat comes from or even what it is. Smug editorials touting the virtues of butcher's horsemeat are a distraction from legitimate alarm over why certain producers chose to mix in horse, without labeling it, for probably insidious cost-saving purposes.

Disgust alone may not be seen as an adequate cause for public intervention. Instead, following a modern risk-conscious form of reasoning, many are asking: is horsemeat dangerous? Here public officials were quick to reassure that it is not. For horses raised for human consumption, this is certainly true; however, there linger doubts about horses “redirected” to the food supply that may have been exposed to phenylbutazone, a painkiller used therapeutically for horses but that in human food is considered a carcinogen. The hypothetical risk here is quite low, and this concern over safety is probably a kind of proxy battle. If we prove horsemeat is less safe, our disgust is justified, right?

## The “restless” consumer

What will come of all this? Most people will certainly continue to eat red meat, and probably even frozen dinners with mince. Writing at the height of the mad cow scare, historian Harriet Ritvo (1998) observed that the possibility beef was tainted by BSE didn't eliminate the British appetite for it. A crisis in public faith does not pre-ordain what consumers and their advocates can and will actually do about it. The horsemeat scandal will likely mean many consumers change brands – no trivial consequence since companies expend enormous resources building consumer trust. Government investigations will be launched,

and policymakers will invoke the popular tenets of scientific management: “testability”, “traceability”, and “transparency”, the last in the form of better labelling. But labels are only as effective and reliable a tool as the investment in accounting infrastructures and the trustworthiness and competency of those charged with enforcing them.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of what will soon be known as “that horsemeat food scare” is that it is one more example of the uncertainty and anxiety the public feels about its food supply. We are seeing a normalisation of food scandals, and public institutions and public attention alike have been too busy to address any one problem well. Consumers are left with an overall distrust of their food supply, and yet, to the extent that these problems are pandemic in a consolidated food industry, consumers remain a captive audience. What results is what Lezuan and Schneider (2012) call a “restless consumption”: we are not satisfied by what we eat, but continue to eat it.

## References

Freidberg, S. (2004) *French beans and food scares*. Oxford University Press.

Lezuan, J. and Schneider, T. (2012) “Endless Qualifications, Restless Consumption: The Governance of Novel Foods in Europe” *Science as Culture* 21(3): 265-391.

Ritvo, H. (1998) “Mad cow mysteries,” *American Scholar* 67(2): Spring 113-122

Vialles, N. (1994) *Animal to Edible*. Cambridge University Press.



**Xaq Frohlich** is an adjunct lecturer with Northeastern University CPS. He received his PhD at MIT with a dissertation, “Accounting for Taste”, on the history of U.S. FDA's regulation of food labels.

IT IS NOT ENOUGH THAT IT BE EDIBLE

