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How Lab-Grown Steak Could Save the World

August 6, 2010 at 9:43AM by Marty Beckerman



The British are *furious* that cloned beef and milk may have entered their food supply, and a hundred copies of the original cow *might be next*. Fifty-eight percent of Europeans *wouldn't (knowingly) devour cloned animals* — and half of Americans are *uncomfortable* with the idea — but the omnivorous future holds an even more technologically advanced possibility: *in vitro* meat. No animal is killed; the flesh is lab-grown. (An early supporter of the concept? Winston Churchill.)

It's the same process used for medical stem cell research, and scientists worldwide are trying to perfect it — because no one wants a filet that's *"creamy in color with a texture that falls somewhere between Jell-O and SPAM"* and *"cost[s] \$45,000 per pound."* We spoke to bioengineer Dr. Morris Benjaminson, who created lab-grown fish for NASA, about the numerous ways that "test tube protein" could rescue the planet and the human race.

ESQUIRE: Why eat lab-grown meat when we can have delicious cloned meat like they do in England?

DR. MORRIS BENJAMINSON: Cloned meat is bound to be unsafe because of genetic degradation — at least so far. We learned that with Dolly the sheep. Lab-grown meat is different in terms of safety; it's merely tissue that's been removed from the body of a living animal and maintained outside of that body. It doesn't require genetic manipulation, merely nutrients and stimuli so the meat will remain viable and increase in mass. And the whole point of growing meat in test tubes is the philosophy of surveillance, so there won't be viruses or disease-causing entities. If small tumors start to arise, somebody would see it and get rid of that particular culture.

ESQ: There won't be methane emissions without a digestive tract. Could this technology stop global warming?

MB: Reports have definitively shown that animal husbandry produces massive pollution, and a large percentage of our problems are caused by raising large numbers of animals for slaughter. Look at the

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way chickens are raised. Fish raised in captivity produce enormous quantities of waste, and there's no good way to dispose of it. The environment is not being affected favorably; from the standpoint of preserving the environment, lab-grown meat technology certainly deserves support. And beyond climate change, this could stop famines in places like Ethiopia and Darfur, where people starve to death because they don't have enough protein in their diet.

ESQ: *So how long before we can buy this in the supermarket?*

MB: I wouldn't have proposed the research to NASA if I hadn't thought there would be commercialization of the technology because the funding came from the Small Business Innovative Research Act. Timing depends on a lot of factors, and it's hard to say when this will come to fruition. Each meat has unique problems and requirements; I concentrated on fish, the Dutch are working on pork, and other people have made some attempts at beef.

If the U.S. government put more money into this work, it would proceed more quickly. My goal was to feed astronauts on the long voyage to Mars — it could also be used on submarines — but NASA decided not to go to Mars yet, so now I'm starting a nonprofit; we'll raise money on the Internet. Venture capital is not going to do that because they don't invest in basic research. The Dutch government is putting a significant amount of money into it, but the level of public funding in America just isn't sufficient. PETA offered a million dollars to anyone who can do it, but that was ridiculous because you would need the million dollars to even start the research.

ESQ: *Nobody is going to pay \$45,000 for a hamburger though.*

MB: First comes government funding, then comes private industry — and private industry caters to the market. People are already paying more for organic meat because they think it's healthier and safer; if it's proven that test tube meat is healthier and safer, people will pay more for it. Not everybody, because some religions consider meat barbaric no matter where it comes from, but a given percentage of the population. The NRA will be shooting at clay pigeons instead of turkeys and deer and quail.

ESQ: *And we could eat any kind of animal without guilt? How would Rover and Whiskers taste?*

MB: I personally would not feel right about eating dog or cat, but Lewis and Clark ate dog so it's not un-American. Just to be clear, though, I am not a vegetarian — I like to eat meat.

Photo Credit: Mike Kemp/Rubberball Productions/Getty Images



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