

Are Rabbits Pets or Meat?



A protestor outside of a Whole Foods store in Manhattan on August 17th (Courtesy of Miriam Wasser)

No one is talking about selling kittens and puppies at the meat counter, but for the group of bunny-loving pet owners protesting near the Whole Foods in Union Square, they might as well be. Fifty or so women and men of all ages carry signs, pass out flyers and pamphlets, and try to spread their message to passing Manhattanites. “Boycott Whole Foods,” they say, “because they’re killing rabbits.”

Earlier this year, after developing its own [welfare standards](#), Whole Foods launched a [rabbit-meat pilot program](#) across several North American regions that involves selling whole rabbit carcasses. In response, rabbit-protection activists organized a day of action this past weekend outside of more than 40 stores across the country.

“Remember,” explains one [website](#) dedicated to this day, “Whole Foods says they are carrying rabbit meat because of customer demand. We need to show that enough customers demand that Whole Foods NOT carry rabbit meat.”

“Boycott Whole Foods! They’re selling rabbit meat!” yells one of the protesters as she paces across the sidewalk holding up a homemade sign. “My name is not dinner,” it says in big letters above pictures of rabbits.

“God, that’s disgusting!” a woman says as she walks by, accepting a pamphlet from one of the protesters. “Rabbit is delicious,” says another, waving away the flyer. For every person who stops to sign the petition, there are plenty more who don’t care or can’t be bothered.

A teenager engages with the demonstrators. “Is the only reason we’re not eating them because they’re pets?” he asks. “What about the fact that they’re overpopulated in Australia? Shouldn’t we eat those?” He has an argumentative, smirk-like smile.

“The hypocrisy of Whole Foods,” one of the day’s organizers, Tim Neithercott, begins to say, but the teen walks away before he can finish his sentence.

Virtually everyone involved in the debate over rabbit meat is outspoken, frequently turning to social media to accuse and insult. Meanwhile, Whole Foods has been rather mum on the topic. Its [representatives](#) have occasionally [told media outlets](#) and activists that the company is committed to creating and following humane standards, and that it hopes to become an industry leader in rabbit meat should the pilot program be successful.



Miriam Wasser

This may seem like a trivial fight involving a disproportionate amount of vitriol, but at its core it's a debate that sheds light on the sometimes arbitrary categories we construct to make sense of the world.

* * *

Among the 873 acres of gently sloping hills and fields of Devil's Gulch Ranch in Marin County, California, owners Mark Pasternak and Myriam Kaplan-Pasternak grow a lot of grapes and raise a lot of rabbits. But not just any rabbits: Devil's Gulch is one of the largest rabbit-meat producers in the state and sells to high-end restaurants like Chez Pannisse, The French Laundry, and over a hundred others. At the height of their operation, the husband-and-wife pair had 12,000 rabbits, but these days, they keep about 2,000 and process 100 to 300 a week. They average, Mark estimates, about 10,000 a year. They are known for their high-quality meat, and given that Myriam specializes in rabbit veterinary care and nutrition, it's safe to say they know how to raise bunnies.

The Pasternaks have their hands full with restaurant orders, so they won't be

supplying to Whole Foods—those rabbits come from two large, USDA-certified plants: De Bruin Brothers in Iowa, and another undisclosed processor in Missouri—but they applaud the company’s decision to start selling it.

“I don’t think it would be a bad thing if it did normalize or get the American public to eat it more,” Mark says. Rabbit may not be very popular in this country, but if you’re going to eat meat, he points out, it’s one of the better options out there, nutritionally and environmentally speaking.

Rabbits are easy to raise and butcher in your backyard, they’re light on the environment—producing six pounds of rabbit meat requires the same amount of food and water as it takes to produce one pound of cow meat—and their meat is lean and low in cholesterol. The biggest drawback of rabbit meat has traditionally been the struggle to find it in stores, a point *Modern Farmer* writer Karin Pinchin makes in [an article](#) that ponders whether rabbit is the new "super meat." With Whole Foods taking on the role of supplier, this might not be a problem anymore.

But Margo DeMello, a professor of cultural anthropology at Canisius College, is convinced grocery stores shouldn't sell rabbit meat. DeMello, who is the president of the House Rabbit Society and a co-author of the book *Stories Rabbits Tell*, says it's a problem that stores carry the meat of “an animal that has been embraced as a pet in millions of American households.” Sure, Whole Foods’s decision was a response to demand, she says, but they’re only going to end up creating more of it by putting it in their stores.

“Right now, it’s five regions, but eventually, if this pilot program is successful, it’s going to be all the regions,” she says. “And if that is successful, then the other stores are going to say, ‘Hey, we want to get in on the action!’” Whole Foods is a [self-proclaimed industry leader in rabbit meat](#), and DeMello and her allies fear it won’t be long before factory-farmed rabbits start popping up everywhere.

* * *

“I would like everyone to know what the people against rabbit meat are like. I am

being harassed by them because I said I support [Whole Foods's] decision to sell rabbit meat," Corinne Fayo wrote on the [Facebook page for her pro-rabbit-breeding group](#), the Rabbit Education Society. This was after she discovered the [website](#) devoted to stopping her, and others, from breeding rabbits. "They can't even get the facts straight, they put on that page I breed meat rabbits; I don't. They are mentally ill, steal people's pictures, lie, and harass," she wrote. Fayo calls her critics "fanatics."

Just to remind you, we are still talking about rabbit meat here.

Splashed as they are with semi-anonymous insults, Facebook and other public comment forums seem to function as this debate's equivalent of junior-high bathroom stalls. But after reading through hundreds of Facebook posts and tons of websites and blogs, it prompts the question: If your thoughts on rabbit meat are so passionately tied to your sense of right and wrong, then is compromise out of the question?

Fiery rhetoric aside, the rabbit-meat debate has some similarities with the [conversation about horsemeat](#). Eating horse is common in other parts of the world, but here in the States, most people can't quite bring themselves to do it. "Horses are not found in any grocery store chain in this country," Margo DeMello says, "and horses don't even live in our homes!" Like rabbits, horses blur that boundary between animals we use for utility or food, and animals that we consider pets.

However, according to DeMello, public opinion has shifted in recent years, and more people consider bunnies pets than ever before. "They are the third most common companion mammal in the U.S.," she writes in an email, citing a survey mentioned in an [industry publication](#).

Predictably, those supporting the right to consume rabbit meat question that statistic for its semantic vagueness. "Companion animals," "pets," "small mammals"—it all sounds, at least to the pro-rabbit-meat side, like a convenient bending of words.

For years, Corinne Fayo, who's in favor of rabbit-breeding, has asked the House Rabbit Society to share the sources of their rabbit-related data, but they won't. "Some of it I think they just make up," she says with a sigh, having read through all the

studies and links she can get her hands on, none of them conclusive. “And then they say, ‘Well, this is what we’ve seen,’ as if that’s good enough.”

No reliable statistics about rabbits exist in the U.S. like they do for dogs and cats, because veterinarians, shelters, pet stores, and breeders are not required to tabulate them. In fact, [much of what we know about the number of rabbits](#) is either estimated, the result of surveys, or otherwise qualitatively constructed.

But worrying about data is probably just a distraction, because, ultimately, “pet” is a relative term—there are [more fish](#) in our home aquariums than there are pet dogs, and any category that lumps the two together feels inadequate.

* * *

Standing on the sidewalk across the street from the Union Square Whole Foods, Susan Lillo and Tamara Bedic hold up their posters proudly. Today's organizers asked everyone to stay peaceful and at a reasonable distance from the store's entrance, but Bedic looks anxious to get closer to the shoppers.

“They’re not going to tell me one person is blocking the entrance with a sign,” she says to Lillo. “I’m going over there.”

“Good luck!” Lillo shouts over the noise of 14th Street as Bedic walks across. It isn’t long before a dozen or so of the protestors follow her lead and migrate across the street to confront the people going in and out of the grocery store, which, as it turns out, is not currently selling rabbit meat.

A woman passing by the protest whispers to her friend, “If they were in Italy with these signs, they would get...” She trails off, ominously.

Rabbits, as this passer-by is implying, are widely consumed in other countries. Western Europeans love rabbit sausage, slow-cooked rabbit stews, and braised bunny dishes, while the Chinese—[who account for 30 percent of global rabbit consumption](#)—consider rabbit's head a delicacy.

Rabbit was even a staple of the American diet at one time. It helped sustain the

European transplants who migrated west across the frontier, and during World War II, eating rabbit was promoted as an act of patriotism akin to growing a victory garden. But as small farms gave way to large-scale operations, rabbit meat's popularity melted away and other meats took over.

One hypothesis is that rabbits fell out of fashion because they're not amenable to factory farming in the way chickens and cows are. Since they're at the bottom of the food-chain, they breed a lot, but this tends to leave them with vulnerable immune systems. They die easily if not cared for properly, which means in a massive operation, there isn't much money to be made. Plus, at anywhere from \$10 to \$13 per pound, rabbit is probably pretty far from becoming the new chicken.

* * *

Janet Groves, a vocal member of the pro-rabbit meat side, wrote a letter to Whole Foods that highlights the debate's fundamental tension: How you feel about eating rabbits has a lot to do with whether you think of them as pets. "There is a vast difference between an animal raised in a home, with a family, as a pet, and an animal raised with the intent of being harvested for meat," she writes. "Of course, the [activists] want to know what, exactly, the difference in those animals is. The difference in those rabbits is, of course, purpose."

"In some ways, obviously, the categories are completely arbitrary," Margo DeMello explains. "There's nothing inherent in an animal that makes it a pet or livestock; there's nothing inherent in an animal that makes it edible or inedible." It's all socially constructed, she says.

In America, it's socially okay to fall in love with your golden retriever and let it sleep at the foot of your bed, but the same can't really be said for a chicken. People's relationships with other creatures exist on a spectrum, or perhaps more accurately, within a series of concentric circles. The closer something is to the center, the more we consider it family; the farther out it is, the less it resembles kin. We don't eat animals emotionally close to us, but the less we identify or have a relationship with them, the more edible they become. Eating your dog is repulsive because it

seems like cannibalism. Yet for **at least 95 percent of Americans**, eating a hamburger doesn't elicit the same response.

Because most Americans don't put rabbits in the same category as dogs and cats, perception is what matters most, DeMello says. "All we're trying to do is change the social perception of rabbits so that more people see and understand what we see, which is that they're smart and they're funny and they're—you have a rabbit, don't you?"

And with her self-interruption, DeMello pinpointed why I find this debate so fascinating: Yes, I used to have a pet rabbit, but I also spent a season working on a farm that raised and butchered rabbits a few years ago. I even ate some of those rabbits, too, ending my stint as a vegan. I knew our animals were raised and slaughtered in a manner I deemed humane, and I decided there wasn't anything wrong with eating meat if it comes from a respectable source. All that said, I would never eat a pet rabbit.

Why is it that when I think about eating a dog I immediately think of the dogs I grew up with, but when I think about eating a rabbit, my first thought isn't my pet bunny?

* * *

When Hal Herzog and his wife bought their first house together 37 years ago in North Carolina, their neighbors were elderly "back-to-the-landers" who grew all of their own vegetables and fertilized their crops with rabbit manure. They also ate the rabbits if they felt like eating meat. It wasn't long before Herzog, a professor of anthrozoology, or human-animal relations, and his wife were growing their own garden and raising rabbits for meat too.

"For the first time in my life I was taking responsibility for my eating habits," Herzog says. "I was the guy who raised them, I was the guy who killed them, I was the guy who skinned them out, and I was the guy who cooked them. There was a lot of satisfaction in being able to do that."

These days, Herzog is no longer a quasi-homesteader. He's swapped that lifestyle for

one of teaching and writing about human-animal relationships—his most recent book is titled *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals*. “We think of ourselves as a nation of animal lovers. What we really like to do with animals is eat them,” he says.

Why can some people—Herzog, Corinne Fayot, Janet Groves, Mark Pasternak, me—look at rabbits as a species and say, *these ones are pets, and those ones are livestock*, and not feel like moral hypocrites?

Herzog started thinking about this 20 years ago, when he was sitting in a hotel bar having a beer with the psychologist and animal rights activist, Ken Shapiro. Herzog knew Shapiro was a vegan; Shapiro knew Herzog ate meat. Both men had read all of the same psychology and animal-rights literature, and both spent a lot of time working through the same philosophical questions. But somehow, they came to different conclusions about how to live their lives.

“Hal, I don’t get it: why aren’t you like us?” Shapiro suddenly asked. Herzog didn’t have an answer. He still doesn’t.

“I’ve been struggling with this for a long time,” Herzog says. “I can handle moral ambiguity. I can deal with it. So I don’t have that need for moral consistency that animal activists do.” He laughs a little. “And I know that their logic is better than mine, so I don’t even try arguing with them. They win in these arguments.”

Herzog would like to see rabbits covered under the Humane Slaughter Act—they currently aren’t because of an odd USDA quirk that classifies them as poultry, which is exempt. And if Whole Foods can find sources of rabbits that are humanely raised, and humanely slaughtered, Herzog sees no problem with the store selling the meat.

But, he says, he’d be disgusted if Whole Foods were to start selling dog and cat meat. “That’s not a logically defensible argument in and of itself,” he says, “but I like to think that we have two operating systems when it comes to morality—one is logical and the other is emotional—and they sort of come into conflict sometimes. So my logical side might say, yeah, there’s really no big difference between dog and cat and

rabbit because ethically, what's the distinction?"

He goes on: "But my inner moral compass—my sense of disgust—sort of says, 'No, it's not okay for Whole Foods to serve dog and cat,' even though I know I'm being inconsistent."

"Margo puts them in the same category," he says. "And I respect her views."

* * *

Outside of the Union Square store, the activists are talking to a small crowd. "They refuse to test products on the very animals they turn around and sell as meat," says a man wearing fuzzy bunny ears and holding a big sign.

This inconsistency presents a valid question: If I decide there is something ethically wrong with dripping chemicals into a rabbit's eye to test its toxicity, is it hypocritical to eat that animal?

Hal Herzog talks about the relative ability of an individual to live with moral inconsistency, but perhaps the rabbit debate is less about morality and instead has to do with the categorical boundaries we use to talk about the debate in the first place. Maybe someone like Herzog isn't tortured by Whole Foods's decision because it doesn't upset his mental categorization of different animals.

But if Whole Foods were to sell dog and cat meat, it would cut across the categories, and disrupt the way he orders and understands the universe; dogs are unequivocally pets in this country, therefore you don't eat them. This system of organization might be based partly in logic, but a lot of it comes from emotionally-charged experiences.

Those involved are only trying to navigate their relationships with all other creatures—humans included—based on the lines drawn in their own minds. The fact that most of this boils down to arbitrary subjectivity might seem dissatisfying. But that might be the best way to make sense of the contradictions in this small corner of the moral universe, complete with its ethically-flexible eaters, its relatively indifferent grocers, its carnivorous rabbit-breeders, its pet owners, its animal lovers, and its unwavering

activists—even if sometimes it's hard to keep track of all those categories.