

Tarris Rosell

Why I Can't Be Vegetarian

Females are 100 percent more likely than males to be vegetarians.

That is the result of an unscientific survey of the Lofgren Rosell household in Kansas City. Three female family members—a wife and two teenage daughters—all responded yes to the sole survey question: “Are you a vegetarian?” Three male members, including yours truly, are carnivores.

Vegetarianism at our house began years ago in Nashville, home of the Wild Boar and other meat-lover restaurants we could never afford. The oldest daughter was a peer-oriented middle schooler when she stopped eating meat, along with her best church friend. At the time we thought it an unhealthy fad. But four years later Karis is imitating no one, still “veggie,” and quite healthy.

Her mother took up vegetarian cuisine in response to the Bush war this past January. Figure that one out. The war's over, we're told, but Ruth's diet remains meatless.

Both have their reasons for abstaining from meat. They are admirable, almost persuasive reasons. A consistent ethic of nonviolence calls into question unnecessary violence against vulnerable nonhuman species. Slaughter animals increasingly are raised and warehoused in “factory farms” and in a manner—even prior to slaughter—that makes animal-lovers cringe. Proteins can be consumed in healthier ways than via meat. Grains to feed beef cattle and pork for American and European conspicuous carnivorous consumption are used disproportionately to their potential utilization in feeding the world's hungry.

Another daughter turned 13 in the midst of that recent war. As the last female hold-out with two family role models leading the way, Hannah's fate was predictable. By spring, our family dinner table was split right down the middle: male carnies on one side, female veggies balancing out the other. Clearly, I conclude, vegetarianism is a gender thing.

Tarris Rosell

This brings me to the very reason I cannot become a vegetarian. It has little to do with an appetite for meat. Like most men, I like the barbeque sauce more than what is under it. In short: real men grill.

Like the initial survey, this hypothesis has not yet been tested scientifically. But there is preliminary evidence that I'm on the right track. Asked independently of his father's speculations to respond to the vegetarian-carnivore question, 16-year-old Nehemiah spontaneously said the exact same thing. "Real men grill."

I come from Minnesota, where, as Garrison Keillor observed of his imaginary Lake Wobegon, other things are more important to men than grilling meat. Nehemiah's coming of age, however, took place right here in "Cow Town," home of KC Masterpiece BBQ, Gates Barbecue Restaurants, the annual Lenexa (our suburb) Barbeque Cook-Off and other carnivorous delights reminiscent of Kansas City's beefy history.

So on the Fourth of July, despite nearly 100-degree heat and a relative humidity to match, I grilled. Why? Because real men do.

But, my veggie spouse queried, "Couldn't 'real men' grill veggie burgers?"

In Kansas City and elsewhere, real men grill real meat, not soybeans.

It isn't just the flavor, though soybeans dressed up to look like meat neither taste nor smell like that to which they aspire.

The scent has a lot to do with it. The smell of real meat grilled by real men can be picked up by sensitive noses blocks away. It is especially noticeable to neighbors.

As I've come to understand this complex cultural phenomenon, the basic need for real men to grill real meat isn't due to some existential gender dread, male identity crisis or the desire "to prove something." It isn't necessarily a biological drive or something to be explained by means of evolutionary process theory. Males are carnivorous simply because real men grill. And real men grill because if we didn't stoke up a bit of BBQ several times each summer, our neighbors would

Tarris Rosell

begin to wonder about us.

We're all a little bit from Lake Wobegon, in that what matters most to a decent man is not grilling or eating, or even gender, but rather the answer to one of life's persistent questions: "What will the neighbors think?"

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