CULTURE DESK

EATING THE EASTER BUNNY

By Jason Wilson

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A coveted ingredient in many global cuisines, rabbit meat has always been a hard sell among American diners. PHOTOGRAPH BY GERHARD WESTRICH / IAIF VAULT

On a recent evening, I was in the meat department at a Whole Foods in Philadelphia's Fairmount neighborhood, pondering what to cook for Easter brunch. Last year, I bought two rabbits from a nearby branch and served a peppery and aromatic main course of roasted rabbit with fennel. At the Sunday meal, though my niece and nephew did exclaim, with nervous laughter, "You cooked the Easter bunny!" my family members were not particularly scandalized by the dish. No one accused me of being a "bunny boiler" like, say, Glenn Close, in "Fatal Attraction." There was general agreement that the meat tasted a lot like chicken.

Thinking I might do a bunny encore this year, I searched Whole Foods' refrigerated and frozen cases for rabbit meat. Finding

none, I asked the young woman behind the butcher counter where it was. “We stopped selling rabbit because of all the protesters,” she replied. I’d never seen a protester at any of the Whole Foods where I shop in the Philly area. “Protesters at this store?” I asked. “Yeah,” the woman said. “They used to come with bullhorns and pictures of rabbits and everything. I think people maybe stopped buying the rabbit because of the protesters.” I looked around at shelves stocked with the meat of cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, geese, quail, lamb, bison, deer, and other animals. “Why did they single out rabbits?” I asked. “I guess because they’re cuter than cows?” she said.

I tried a second location, near my home, in the suburbs, and a meat-department employee there told me the same story. When I returned home, empty-handed, a quick visit to the Whole Foods Web site confirmed that the company had put an end to a short-lived pilot rabbit program that had launched in the spring of 2014. The program was, according to Whole Foods, the culmination of several years spent researching humane farming and butchering practices. A ten-page report on animal-welfare standards emphasized that the chain’s rabbit suppliers must minimize suffering and offer quality living conditions, and use no antibiotics or genetically modified feed. “Rabbits must be caught calmly and with a minimum of chasing,” the document stated. Farmers had to allow the rabbits to socialize and play. In a statement released when the meat was introduced, Whole Foods said that “lots of customers have requested that we carry rabbit,” but acknowledged that “this product won’t appeal to everyone.”

Among the latter category were groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and House Rabbit Society, which quickly targeted Whole Foods stores as “bunny butchers” and held demonstrations at dozens of locations across the country. Online, the protesters mobilized under the hashtag #savethebunnies. After only slightly more than a year, Whole Foods reversed course, quietly removing rabbit from its meat selection at the end of 2015. To explain its decision, the chain posted only this brief statement: “Whole Foods Market was pleased to have worked with a small group of farmers to create a rabbit growing system that met our quality standards, unlike any other in the industry. However, the pilot ultimately revealed the sales volume did not justify the continuation or expansion of the pilot to a national program.” (When I contacted Whole Foods for further comment, its communication team e-mailed me the same statement.)

For those of us who enjoy eating rabbit, its presence at Whole Foods had felt like progress. A common and coveted ingredient in many global cuisines—French, Italian, Chinese; in Szechuan province, even the head is considered a delicacy—rabbit meat has always been somewhat of a hard sell among American diners. Just about the only era when rabbit captured the attention of American home cooks was during the privations of the Second World War. Along with encouraging the planting of victory gardens, the U.S. government entreated citizens to raise rabbits in their back yards for food. A January, 1943, article in *Life*, “Rabbits: Raising Them For Meat Is Now a Helpful Patriotic Hobby,” advised, “Domestic rabbits are one of the few pets that can be enjoyed dead or alive. Stewed or fried, they have the flavor of white chicken meat. As pets, they are friendly and decorative.” Issues of *Gourmet* from the nineteen-forties published rabbit recipes, even the occasional one crafted in witty holiday verse: “Although it isn’t / Our usual habit, / This year we’re eating / The Easter Rabbit.” Then the war ended, and people went back to eating cows and chickens and pigs.

Over the past decade, though, high-end chefs in the United States have been embracing rabbit meat. At Osteria, Marc Vetri’s northern Italian restaurant in the Fairmount neighborhood of Philly, the menu currently features rabbit “casalinga,” a dish of rabbit legs and saddle meat pan-roasted with butter, pancetta, sage, and rosemary and served on a bed of polenta. Though the comparison to chicken meat is apt in many ways, rabbit has a slight gaminess that, combined with its delicate size, lends the experience of eating it a faintly primal air. On a recent visit to Osteria, I began eating the casalinga daintily, with a knife and fork, but by the end was gnawing at the bones. Jeff Michaud, the culinary director and a partner in Vetri Family Restaurants, which operates seven restaurants in Philadelphia, learned the dish from his wife’s grandmother in Lombardy, in northern Italy, where she made it every Sunday. (*Casalinga* means homemade or, literally, “housewife.”) He told me that the restaurant sells at least thirty rabbit dishes per week. “Rabbit is an underutilized animal,” he said. “Bringing ingredients like rabbit back into the public is good all around. You don’t want that product to disappear from the food world.” (The Vetri empire was

recently acquired by Urban Outfitters, so animal-rights groups have a new corporate entity at which to direct their ire.)

Indeed, food activists often point out that rabbit farming has a number of advantages over other kinds of livestock. According to a frequently quoted figure from Slow Food USA, the quantity of food and water required to produce a single pound of cow meat can produce six pounds of rabbit meat. Rabbit is higher in protein and lower in cholesterol than beef or pork. A 2013 article in *Modern Farmer*, sensing a mainstream breakthrough, asked, "Are Rabbits the New Super Meat?" In this country, however, serving bunny on a plate tends to conjure up cartoon images of Peter Rabbit or cute little Thumper. An even bigger challenge is the pet factor. I can empathize somewhat with this problem—my family kept two bunnies, Ernie and Bert, very briefly when I was a child; we mistakenly believed they were both males, until, one day, Bert gave birth to a half-dozen babies—but it's not going to stop me from serving rabbit for Easter.

So on Tuesday afternoon I paid a visit, along with my eleven-year-old son, Wes, to South Philly's famed Ninth Street Market (also known as the "Italian Market"), which is home to a half-dozen butcher shops. Our destination was D'Angelo's, a store specializing in game meat which has been open in the Italian Market since 1910. At D'Angelo's, whose walls are adorned with furs and taxidermy heads, you can buy pheasant, antelope, wild boar, alligator, kangaroo, and even python filets. A sign in the window advertises "boneless rattlesnake." The owner of the store, Sonny D'Angelo, is a third-generation butcher who is famous for his gruffness (the Philadelphia *Inquirer* has referred to him as "the dark prince of the Italian Market"). In a self-published cookbook titled "Are You Game?," he offers this assessment of animal-rights protesters: "It's easy to pass judgment and be indignant, when you go home to your house in the suburbs."

D'Angelo was out when Wes and I visited. An older man behind the counter identified himself as D'Angelo's brother. When I asked for a rabbit, he emerged from the refrigerator with a huge animal, at least three feet long, covered in bright white fluff. I have to confess that, after buying my Whole Foods rabbit already skinned, the floppy bunny ears and bushy tail came as something of a shock. It looked like it could have woken up and hopped away. But Sonny's brother made quick work of the carcass with a knife and cleaver. (Wes, naturally, recorded a video on his phone.) We tried to engage him in small talk, but all we learned was that the rabbit came from a farm in rural Pennsylvania that uses "no antibiotics or steroids, or anything like that." When he had finished, he plopped the carcass on the sagging butcher block and asked, "Do you want the head?" We said no thanks. With a quick final whack, the head parted ways with the body, and Sonny's brother wrapped our rabbit in butcher paper. We paid in cash. No receipt.

That evening, I got a head start on Easter preparations. I cut the rabbit into six pieces, separating the legs and the saddle meat, then slathered them in a mixture of olive oil, salt, and lots of pepper and fennel seeds. I thinly sliced four whole fennel bulbs and spread the pile, tossed with salt and pepper and more oil, across the bottom of a pan. After giving the vegetables a head start in the oven, I laid the meat on top and let it roast for around forty minutes, flipping the rabbit pieces midway through to help them brown. By the time the rabbit was done cooking, the kitchen was overwhelmed with earthy aromas of meat juices and anise. I grabbed one of the legs and took a bite. It tasted elemental and herbaceous, like early spring itself.

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