

A Selective Carnivore Perspective

By Doug Mensing

When I hear someone is a vegetarian, I commonly ask if their decision is based on:

- personal health
- animal rights
- the environment (and associated social justice implications)

Sometimes, individual vegetarians have a particular passion that drives their chosen food limitations, but many feel all these reasons are valid, and that vegetarianism is something they can do to make the world (and their bodies) a better place in which to live. My personal path to selective carnivorism began after college in the early '90s, and was based on all three reasons above. Over time, I stopped purchasing meat for home consumption, and I increasingly sought and purchased vegetarian options when eating out (which can be challenging, or at least severely limiting, when on the road doing field work in the rural Midwest). Books, such as "The Omnivore's Dilemma" by Michael Pollan, have also informed and supported my eating habits (Spoiler Alert: His take-home message is: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.")

But I am not a vegetarian, nor ever claimed to be. Like many of my beliefs (especially as I age), they are tempered by moderation. Some would see my decision to be a selective carnivore as a lack of conviction—if I believed in it, I should "go all in." But I am OK with the occasional meat-containing meal. From the personal health perspective, I recognize that by choosing a low-meat diet, I need to eat well-balanced, healthy meals (as should everyone) and get adequate protein from dairy and/or plant products (noting that most Americans consume far more protein than necessary; a vegetarian diet, by no means, need compromise peoples' health). Regarding animal rights, our family tries to purchase food from responsible companies that reflect our values, including organic free-range eggs we get from a local farmer. In terms of protecting the environment, that has become an even stronger drive for me to limit my consumption of meat. I originally understood the environmental benefits of a vegetarian diet to revolve around "lost efficiencies." The rule of thumb (which has many exceptions) holds that with each step up the food chain, about 90% of the energy is lost. This loss of energy suggests that eating lower on the food chain requires less energy...which can be viewed as fewer acres of land dedicated to your meal of pasta versus a meal of steak. Again, there are many exceptions and variables to consider (e.g., eating chickens has a significantly lower environmental impact compared with beef, but chickens and cattle are both vegetarians), but numerous peer-reviewed studies have recently drawn attention to the significant impact of livestock and meat production on greenhouse gas emissions and global climate change.

So, juggling all the information out there, the pros and cons, challenges of healthy eating and a busy lifestyle...it can be overwhelming. In order to maintain my practice of selective carnivorism (and maintain my sanity), I try to follow some simple guidelines:

- I don't buy meat for home consumption (this is facilitated by my pescatarian wife, Ashley – a vegetarian who eats fish and seafood... except for a couple BLTs each year, with her homegrown tomatoes...but that is perhaps another article).
- If I were to purchase meat for home consumption, I would try to buy organic, free-range

chickens or other meat that presumably would be healthier for me, provide a better life for the animal, and have less of an impact on the Earth.

- I will occasionally elect to eat meat if I want to partake in a special cultural or ethnic food (no, Taco Bell does not count...but enjoying a few of my mother's sweet-and-sour meatballs is truly special to me, and I trust the planet will not collapse due to this annual indulgence).
- When I do eat meat, I take a small portion, or more frequently, select foods in which the meat is used as a minor ingredient, for flavoring.

So, while my carbon footprint could be smaller through a vegetarian (or vegan) diet, I feel the decision I've made to be a selective carnivore is consistent with my life, health, and values. Some may feel burdened by that "selective" aspect—always wrestling and deciding—but I have not found that to be the case. I simply try to live lightly on the Earth, for all of life's sake... and I can still enjoy my mom's meatballs once a year.