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Between Steer and Steak

You buy locally sourced grass-fed beef. But where is it processed, and how far does it travel before it hits your grill? Hilary Achauer explores how the slaughterhouse can affect our environment and our health.

By Hilary Achauer

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All: Jake Krekorian

James Holtslag is working up a sweat.

Wearing a chain-mail apron and his signature flat cap, he stands before a crowd with the hindquarter of a steer on the table in front of him.

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Wielding a cheap, flexible knife, Holtslag begins disconnecting the muscle from the connective tissue. He describes what he's doing as he works, pausing to wipe the perspiration accumulating on his forehead.

It's a Thursday night in August. A crowd of about 70 is hanging on his every word and snapping photos with their phones while he works. As Holtslag carves up the steer, the cuts of meat are rushed to the kitchen, where they are being turned into a six-course dinner, paired with beer from Societe Brewing Company, a local craft brewer in San Diego.

The man who raised the steer, John "Dey Dey" de Bruin, of Dey Dey's Best Beef Ever Ranch, is on hand to talk about his grass-fed beef and free-range chickens. The demonstration is part of an evening titled *The Rancher, The Butcher, The Brewer and The Chef*, held at Alchemy Restaurant in San Diego, Calif. Holtslag and Trey Nichols, who are opening San Diego's first whole-animal butcher shop—*The Heart and Trotter*—organized the event.

But before anyone can eat, Holtslag has to finish carving up the steer.

"Whole-animal butchery is very physical," Holtslag says. "There's lots of bone. You really have to get in there."

That sterile-looking meat in the grocery store? It might not be as safe as you think.

This experience is a far cry from the sterile, plastic-wrapped cuts of meat found in the grocery store. It's evident that our dinner tonight came from an animal. Not only is everyone in the room perfectly fine with this, but they are



Most meat found in the supermarket is cut with a band saw, leaving behind several tasty cuts that can only be extracted by hand.



The crowd watches Holtslag carve the meat that will be their dinner.

also eagerly watching the butchering process, crowding close to get a better view.

The hindquarter in front of us has a faint, earthy odor. Holtslag leans his whole body into the steer, but the process is almost silent as he carefully separates meat from bone.

Consumers have typically been shielded from the slaughtering and butchering as processors break the link between the living, breathing animal in the field and the piece of meat sizzling on the barbecue. But where and how an animal is killed can impact the health and safety of the meat.

And that sterile-looking meat in the grocery store? It might not be as safe as you think.

A Matter of Scale

When livestock leaves the farm, it must go to a USDA-certified slaughterhouse, unless the farm has its own slaughterhouse on site. The only way around this is if an individual buys an entire animal and doesn't resell any of the meat.



Whole-animal butchery requires strength and dexterity, plus a thorough understanding of the animal's anatomy.

Much like all farms are not the same, all slaughterhouses are not created equal. While most of us have read about and can picture animals on a farm, many people don't have any idea what happens after animals leave the corral. Up until recently, the butchering and slaughtering process was considered to be an out-of-sight, out-of-mind affair: the less we know about it, the better.

As we learn more about the process, it's clear that slaughterhouses are a critical link in the food chain and a potential cause of contamination.

In an interview for the TV show *Frontline*, Eric Schlosser, the author of *Fast Food Nation*, said slaughterhouses have an impact on food safety.

"It's that speed of production that can lead to food-safety problems. When workers are working very quickly, they may make mistakes. It's during the evisceration of the

animal, or the removal of the hide, that manure can get on the meat. And when manure gets on some meat, and then that meat is ground up with lots of other meat, the whole lot of it can be contaminated," Schlosser told *Frontline*.

There's also the issue that slaughterhouses aren't found on every corner, so many farmers have to transport their animals long distances for processing.

"In my opinion, the lack of independent (slaughterhouses) and cut-and-wrap facilities across the country is the largest hurdle preventing the spread and commercialization of niche and sustainably produced meats," Rebecca Thistlethwaite wrote on her blog, *Honest Meat*. Thistlethwaite is the author of *Farms With a Future: Creating and Growing a Sustainable Farm Business*.



A cut of meat on its way to the kitchen.

So how do you find out more about where your meat is processed? If you buy the meat directly from the farmer, just ask.

Chris Fuller is very familiar with the challenges facing small farms when it's time to get their animals slaughtered. He was the general manager of Alleghany Meats in Virginia, a small-scale slaughterhouse serving farmers in the Alleghany Mountains region of Virginia and West Virginia. He's made a career out of connecting farmers with the right slaughterhouse and helping small farms open their own facilities.

"There are different scales of slaughterhouses," Fuller said. "There's different regulations involved. Some small slaughterhouses don't do contract work. It's just for their business—their farm—only. Some places have high standards and focus on humane treatment and sanitation. Not everyone is so worried about high quality."

When Fuller lived in Colorado, he would go to a farmer's market with six farms selling their grass-fed, antibiotic- and hormone-free meat. Five of the six farms got their meat processed at a small slaughterhouse nearby.

To save money, the sixth farmer drove about eight hours to Swift & Company, a wholly owned subsidiary of JBS S.A., a Brazilian company that is the world's largest processor of fresh beef and pork, with more than US\$40 billion in annual sales as of 2012. It is also the largest beef processor in Australia.

In 2009, Swift & Company was linked to multiple E. coli outbreaks.

The farmer who used Swift & Company had better marketing, more attractive signs and better prices than his competitors, so he frequently outsold the other five meat purveyors. Odds are the meat the consumers were buying at that farmer's market was fine, but Fuller feels consumers should be informed of the slaughtering practices of their favorite farms.

So how do you find out more about where your meat is processed? If you buy the meat directly from the farmer, just ask. Fuller thinks consumers should educate themselves about where the meat is processed.

"Talk to the farmers. Pay attention," he said.

John Morosani is the co-founder of Laurel Ridge Farm Grass Fed Beef in Litchfield, Conn. "I've been raising cows for 10 years. We started with seven cows. Now we have 180 cows. We slaughtered two cows the first year, and this year we slaughtered about 43 cows. Not too many businesses are growing 30 to 40 percent (in that time period)," he said.

He feels the biggest problem with the current USDA regulations governing slaughterhouses is that they are the same for all slaughterhouses, regardless of the size. The same rules are applied to both a 1,500-square-foot plant that processes 15 animals a day and a 25,000-square-foot plant with animals on an assembly line.

"The assembly line doesn't slow down," Morosani said, which he thinks makes it harder for the inspector to keep up with the slaughtering process.

"A USDA inspector has to be present (at the slaughterhouse). But the big plants are processing 1,000 animals a day, and a guy can't be everywhere at all times," Morosani



John "Dey Dey" de Bruin (left), a former physicist for Hughes Aircraft, bought a cattle farm at 55 and started a second career as a rancher.



The crowd at Alchemy enjoys craft beer while a chef rushes to prepare the freshly butchered meat.

feels things can easily slip through the cracks of large-scale industrial processing.

Morosani believes small slaughterhouses should have different USDA requirements than the big facilities.

“Our slaughterhouse has three to four employees. It’s not one-size-fits-all. It’s like having the same rules for a GM plant as an autobody shop,” he said.

He feels if the rules were different for smaller slaughterhouses, it might encourage people to open smaller facilities to serve the smaller farms.

“It (should not) be as difficult to open a smaller operation; it does not need to be as complicated ... as the others,” Morosani said.

Supply and Demand

San Diego County has more small farms than any other county in the U.S., but there is not one slaughterhouse in the entire region. Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau, said there are approximately 6,000 farmers in San Diego County. They serve the San Diego region as well as nearby Orange County and Los Angeles County.

Despite the large number of farms, locally raised livestock in San Diego have to travel out of the area to be slaughtered and processed.

**Farmers who raise
livestock can’t take the meat
directly from their farm to
farmer’s markets.**

“There are no local sources,” Larson said. The situation in San Diego is an example of the gap in the chain that is developing due to the lack of available slaughterhouses. There is an explosion of local farms fueled by an increased interest in organic, locally grown food. In the case of produce, farmers find it easy to reach customers through farmer’s markets.

"It's easy to get into farmer's markets," Larson said. "(The markets) give farmers immediate access to their customers, and there is a very low barrier to entry. Whole Foods also needs a pat on the back. They are teaching local farmers to be more sophisticated, and they are always looking for local products."

Farmers who raise livestock, however, can't take the meat directly from their farm to farmer's markets. They have to have their animals slaughtered first. And in San Diego, as in many other places in the country, there are not enough slaughterhouses to meet the demand. This forces San Diego farmers to travel long distances just to get their animals slaughtered.

Krys Cook and her husband, Mike Cook, run Cook Pigs Ranch, located in Julian, Calif., about an hour outside of the city of San Diego. Cook Pigs Ranch is a farm-to-table operation that focuses on heritage pigs. The Cooks drive nine hours each way to get their pigs slaughtered and processed.

"It is very costly to bring the pigs up (to slaughter)," Krys said. A mobile slaughterhouse, or one that is closer to her farm, would make a big difference in their business, both from a financial and environmental perspective.

Larson said he's not sure why there are no slaughterhouses serving the smaller farms of San Diego.

"It's a chicken-and-the-egg situation," Larson said. The demand continues to grow, but so far the demand has not been enough for someone to take the risk, he said.

"It may be we just don't have the accumulation of enough business (for the slaughterhouse), or someone would have done it," he said. "That may change as the interest in locally grown food increases."

It also may be that opening a slaughterhouse is neither easy nor particularly glamorous. Fuller said that most slaughterhouses are either slammed with work or barely making it.

"There's a time of year when grass-fed animals are ready," Fuller said. "Everybody is trying to get the same slaughter dates."

He said the problem could be solved if the farmers communicated with the slaughterhouses.

"They could rotate the herd so the animals finish earlier," he said.

"Most people don't understand meat processing. People are surprised how expensive it is, surprised by the big lull (at certain points) during the year," Fuller said. "(The farmers) need help with regulations. It can be daunting."

Fuller said the number of small farms has grown substantially in the last 10 years.

"People are learning lessons really quickly," he said.

Boutique Butchers

Butcher shops like The Heart and Trotter don't allow farmers to avoid long drives to the slaughterhouse, but they do connect consumers with the farmer and the animal by making the process more personal and hands on.

It's this desire to connect with their food that led college friends Nichols and Holtslag to start their boutique butcher shop, a business that might seem anachronistic in 2013.

They loved grilling with friends and as foodies became frustrated that they didn't know the origin of their steaks and burgers.

"We got angry not knowing where our meat came from," Nichols said. "We started talking about having control over what goes in our bodies."

Then, about a year ago, Holtslag got laid off from his job as a construction manager. He decided it was time to do something he had always dreamed of doing: becoming a butcher.

"I grew up hunting and fishing in Virginia," Holtslag said. "We would use the entire animal. And I like working with my hands. I'm a woodworker."

Holtslag secured a three-month internship at Lindy & Grundy, a whole-animal butcher shop in Los Angeles. From there, Nichols and Holtslag began working on opening The Heart and Trotter. After a successful Kickstarter campaign and many events like the dinner at Alchemy, The Heart and Trotter now sells its meat online and is close to opening a storefront.

All its beef, lamb, pork and chicken is sourced from local, sustainable, antibiotic and hormone-free family farms within a 250-mile radius of San Diego, and every edible part of the animal is used to make sausages, pâtés, rillettes, stocks, charcuterie and dog food. At The Heart and Trotter, little goes to waste.

In starting The Heart and Trotter butcher shop, Nichols and Holtslag are hoping to bring consumers closer to their food.

While all its meat must be slaughtered at a USDA-certified facility, The Heart and Trotter only works with whole animals and has close relationships with its suppliers. This means its ground beef comes from one steer, a steer that was raised by someone the owners have met.

Compare that to the frozen hamburger patties at Costco that can have meat from many different steers in one patty.

"We buy direct from the farmers," Holtslag said. "A lot of the meat you see in the supermarket has fake farms names on the package."

Some of the names on packages sound charming, but Holtslag said the "farms" are sometimes just divisions of the country's biggest food distributors. And those distributors run into difficulties at times. For example, on July 10, 2013, reports surfaced that Sysco was under investigation for keeping turkey, bacon and other produce in **unrefrigerated sheds**. According to [NBC News](#), Sysco said it would stop using the sheds after additional employees confirmed the practices.

The Heart and Trotter is part of a growing trend of boutique butcher shops, led by Fleisher's Grass-Fed and Organic Meats in New York. Fleisher's opened in 2004 and found fame in 2009 when it was featured in Julie Powell's memoir *Cleaving*, a follow-up to her bestselling *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously*, which was turned into a movie featuring Meryl Streep and Amy Adams in 2009.

Amelia Posada and Erika Nakamura, the couple behind Lindy & Grundy, both interned at Fleisher's before opening their own shop in 2011.

In addition to being a local source for meat, boutique butcher shops also sell cuts of meat not available at the supermarket. Most large butchering operations carve the meat with a band saw. That leaves behind a number of tasty cuts—such as oyster, velvet, blade and rancher steaks—that are only accessible the old-fashioned way: via a well-trained, knife-wielding butcher.

"There are cuts that are amazing that you can't buy anywhere because they have to be cut by hand," Holtslag said. "You have to cut them muscle by muscle."



Holtslag explained that the active muscles are more flavorful but take more time to cook. Cuts from inactive muscles, such as the filet mignon, are less flavorful but much tenderer.

One of The Heart and Trotter's main sources of meat is Dey Dey's Best Beef Ever. De Bruin, its owner, said he enjoys working with small-scale butchers because they take the time to make the meat look its best. Strange as it may sound, the appearance of the meat is extremely important.

Most large butchering operations carve the meat with a band saw, but a number of tasty cuts are only accessible the old-fashioned way: via a well-trained, knife-wielding butcher.

"When I provide a product, I have control over the appearance, quality and marbeling. (Meat) is 90 percent a visual product. Choosing the right butcher is key," de Bruin said.

"They can make hamburger out of steaks. It makes my job more difficult," he said. "It's a challenge to find someone good."

"I try to create a relationship between the butcher and myself," de Bruin said. "It's a partnership."

"People are getting more involved in the source of their food," de Bruin said.

When de Bruin was told about the South American origins of the grass-fed meat available at a local grocery chain, he was dubious about its credibility.

"You can buy anything (in South America)," he said. De Bruin is suspicious that grass-fed regulations might be easy to bypass in South America and the meat may not be



From farm to table, plus beer: brewer Travis Smith, rancher John de Bruin, chef Ricardo Heredia and butcher James Holtslag (left to right).

what it claims. Indeed, the organic-food industry has had its difficulties with food that may or may not be the real deal. De Bruin also points to the environmental impact of transporting meat from continent to continent.

"The most important thing is to find a local source," de Bruin said. He urges consumers to find out how that source treats its animals. He feels the entire process should be transparent.

"If they won't return your calls, you've got a problem," he said.

Know Your Meat

Holtslag continues to butcher the steer, going faster so the chef, Ricardo Heredia, can prepare the first course: fried plantains filled with grilled flank steak, guajillo pepper, charred onion and micro cilantro.

As Holtslag works, he explains he's disconnecting the muscle from the connective tissue

"The active muscles are more flavorful but take more time to cook," Holtslag says. "It's like your legs. Those are active muscles. The inactive muscles, like the tenderloin, are the most tender cuts. They don't get used, and they don't have a lot of flavor."

That type of detail about the food we're about to eat might be off-putting in another context. But here, the crowd eagerly watches the butchering process then happily eats each of the six beef-based courses.

For years, we've put a divide between ourselves and the meat on our plate. The further removed we got from the process, the more we pretended that what we were eating never lived.

The night at Alchemy is an indication that this trend is reversing.

It all comes down to relationships. Holtslag forged a connection with Lindy & Grundy in Los Angeles, whose owners had learned from Fleisher's in New York. Holtslag and Nichols know de Bruin and believe in his farming philosophy, and de Bruin can trust that The Heart and Trotter will make his product look good.

The gap in this chain is the slaughterhouse, and as consumers get more involved in the process and more concerned with the sources of their food, the demand will increase and the slaughterhouse gap will be filled.

Until then, it's the responsibility of the consumer to ask questions and do research. Buy local. Build relationships. And get to know your meat.

Resources

[Eat Wild](#)

[Rodale News' Guide to Buying Grass-Fed Beef](#)

[American Grassfed Association](#)



About the Author

*Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary is an editor and writer for the **CrossFit Journal** and contributes to the CrossFit Games site. An amateur boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and trains at CrossFit Pacific Beach. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.*