



In the flesh: Ryan Donovan, a philosophically minded butcher, is leading the guilt-free meat movement

Have a Cow

Vegetarians no longer own the culinary high ground. Carnivores are just as smug, religiously eating nose-to-tail and preaching the grass-fed gospel **By Sasha Chapman**

IT ALL STARTED INNOCENTLY ENOUGH, with dinner at Cowbell, the unassuming restaurant in Parkdale. The waiter had given us a rundown of the chalkboard menu, which famously lists farmers along with their produce. He told us how the Lake Erie perch had been caught. Where the chicken had been raised. What the steak had once eaten. "Do you want to tell us his name, too?" joked my dinner companion. "George," deadpanned the waiter, without skipping a beat.

Fifteen years ago, that information would have been enough to send me to the meatless entrée. Back then vegetarians owned the moral



high ground. Like so many of my university peers, I tried to forget where my meat came from, preferring to buy bloodless, boneless chicken breasts wrapped in plastic.

How times have changed. That night at Cowbell, the room was filled with self-satisfied carnivores making a virtue out of each bite of sustainability. I know I tucked into George with uncommon gusto. He had been a happy steer, I was sure of it, pastured on grass. Mark Cutrara, the chef, had purchased him directly from Dennis and Denise Harrison's farm in Bradford. And he had butchered the carcass himself,

taking care to make sure that each cut was used to its full potential. The steak was leaner and tougher than the beef I was accustomed to eating, but it seemed a small price to pay for (nearly) guilt-free meat. Without realizing it, I had aligned myself with a growing cult in the city: the cult of the righteous carnivore.

It's supposed to be a win-win approach to meat: animals are treated better and raised in a more environmentally friendly fashion (the production of local, organic, pastured beef consumes far less fossil fuel than feedlot cattle); farmers are paid more because they deal directly with butchers and chefs; less of the animal is wasted; best of all, the consumer gets to eat a healthier, better-quality steak. At the epicentre of this cult is the Healthy Butcher, a small but politically ambitious Queen West shop that's beautifully curated, with pretty artisanal breads from Thuet, deep-yellow eggs from local Mennonites and of course an artfully arranged display case of pork, lamb, chicken and beef. What's different about the Healthy Butcher is that the pig's ears in the window perched next to the pork tenderloin probably came from the same pig.

Owners Tara Longo and Mario Fiorucci are attempting to operate like an old-fashioned butchery, bringing in whole animals and wasting nothing. Though the store boasts the best chicken and porchetta in town, quality seems almost beside the point. No other food shop in Toronto is working harder to change the way we eat. This is due in large part to the head butcher, Ryan Donovan, a high-minded U of T philosophy grad who believes carnivores have a moral responsibility to eat sustainably.

The shop's approach can be off-putting to the uninitiated. There was the time I wanted a flattened chicken for the barbecue. The butcher deftly cut out the back and slipped it into the bag with the chicken. It felt like a reproach: "Here's the waste you've created—you find a way to use it." I took the hint and froze it for stock. A customer may come in looking for a strip loin and leave with a blade steak.

Serious cooks love this uncompromising, holistic ethos. There's a certain amount of bravado that goes along with breaking down a whole animal: finding a use for every cut is the culinary equivalent of Tetris. So perhaps it's no surprise that the back of the shop has become a thriving atelier

for chefs. Scot Woods of Lucien signed up for an apprenticeship last year, as did Mark Cutrara. "Being there made me believe it was possible to open a restaurant like Cowbell," he says dreamily, with the kind of nostalgia one reserves for a first love. "It was full of heretics preaching the word of organics and sustainability."

The shop has developed a devoted following among Queen West idealists, where raw foodists eat chicken sashimi and a growing number of customers prefer the ascetic taste of grass-fed steaks to the highly marbled corn-fattened ones that most of us are used to. But will this same brand of boutique activism work uptown, at the Healthy Butcher's new shop at Eglinton and Avenue Road? Does north Toronto care about its meat?



Cutting edge: the Healthy Butcher appeals to the conscientious carnivore who wants to eat sustainably

ALL BUTCHERS ARE ILLUSIONISTS. No matter what cut we buy, we pay for the whole animal. If we want a boneless breast, we're still going to pay for those bones. If we want only the tenderloin, somebody has to pay for the fact that nobody wanted the round.

Donovan, however, is determined to find a use for every piece of the animal. When the cutting is finished for the day and the store is quiet, he likes to approach neighbourhood bakeries and other small businesses who might have a use for the less popular by-products of his work. "When we first started, I was taking out four commercial green bins a day. Now we're down to one," he says. "It might seem kinda weird, but it's how I measure success."

Moments later, Ishraq, the delivery guy, arrives to pick up a hat box-size hunk of

beef tallow. It will be turned into artisanal soap in Parkdale. Donovan shows me a snowy cascade of leaf lard, the fat that surrounds pork kidneys, which he will render and sell to bakeries (it makes the flakiest pastry). Even the pork rind, which also adds a deliciously crispy coat to the shop's signature porchetta, can be used by tattoo artists to practise their needle work.

"If everyone went home and made stock and used soap made from beef tallow, our average prices would be cheaper," he says.

In theory, I love the idea of nose-to-tail eating. It's the least we can do for a creature that gives its life to feed us. But there are plenty of nights when I can't face three hours of stew making. Like it or not, we've all become accustomed to the conveniences of the modern diet.

I doubt the Healthy Butcher will ever completely convert north Toronto to the less desirable cuts, like blade steaks and inside rounds, which may be one reason the new store was designed with a much larger kitchen and frozen food section. To take some of the burden off the customers, I suspect the kitchen staff will be busy turning ground beef and kidneys into lasagnas and meat pies. The shop, twice as large as its downtown sibling, also offers a range of boutique groceries, from an expanded line of Cookstown vegetables to sustainably harvested fish.

And yet, I love the fact that Donovan and his staff will take the time to explain why a blade steak is a much better deal. (It costs a third of the price and if you cook it right, it will still be tender.) And of course, he dispenses advice and encouragement freely, something most of us need

since our mothers never taught us how to stretch a side of pork through the winter.

After spending a few hours with him, it's hard not to see how narrow and wasteful modern meat habits have become. An animal, after all, is not a loin on legs. As I make a mental list of all the cuts I have to try, I suddenly remember my mother's dog-eared copy of *Fannie Farmer*. It has four recipes just for pig's feet. I ask Donovan about some of the strangest requests he gets. He and a fellow butcher launch into a debate.

It wasn't the pig's eyeball for a science camp at U of T. It wasn't the chicken the customer planned to eat raw. It wasn't the Korean grandmother gesturing to her own neck to illustrate the right pork cut. It was the guy who wanted to grind a beef tenderloin for his dog. **END**