

Eating horse meat: Not as rare as you think

It's considered a delicacy in other countries. There is even horse ice cream.

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By Liz Balmaseda - Palm Beach Post



Who on earth eats horse meat?

It's a timely question, considering the scandalous case of animal slaughter revealed this week during the raid of three Loxahatchee farms. Armed with the results of an undercover investigation by a South Florida animal rights group, Palm Beach County Sheriff's deputies raided the farms where heinous acts of animal cruelty – including the illegal slaughter of horses, shooting of cows and boiling of live pigs – had been reported.

Richard Couto, the veteran animal rights advocate who led the secret operation for the Miami group Animal Recovery Mission, described the macabre findings as “one of the ghastliest tortures of animals that we have ever seen.”

He said the farms were selling the horse meat for human consumption, a third-degree felony on several counts, as Florida forbids the buying, selling, transporting and possession of horse meat for human consumption.

So who eats this meat? The answer may surprise you.

From Canada to Kazakhstan to France to Italy, horse meat is considered a delicacy. In Cuba, horse meat was traditionally used in *tasajo* (dry, salted meat), a dish that is made with beef in this country. In Japan, the meat is used in various ways, including horse meat-flavored ice cream.

“In Japan, it’s even eaten as sashimi (raw),” says Palm Beach County chef Roy Villacrusis. Born and raised in the Philippines, where locals enjoy horse meat “*tapa*” (dried, cured meat), he recalls his grandfather using the meat in a native stew called *kaldereta*. “It’s lean meat.”

For years, world-famous chefs have sung the praises of horse meat.

Chef Rene Redzepi, founder of Copenhagen’s *Noma*, once hailed as the world’s best restaurant, posted a photo of a thick, red steak on Twitter and Instagram last year with this caption:

“Soo good horse T-bone in (northern) Japan – I’d prefer equestrian to wagyu beef any day.”

Traveling epicurean Anthony Bourdain sampled shaved horse meat (with a side of tripe and sweetbreads) at a neighborhood eatery in Rome, a visit featured in a 2011 episode of his Travel Channel series “*The Layover*.”

An episode of “*Top Chef Canada*” featured horsemeat as an ingredient.

And celebrity chef/ restaurateur Marc Murphy, who returns this year to the Palm Beach Food & Wine Festival in December, spoke in support of horse meat consumption in a 2013 interview with CNN’s Erin Burnett, who noted that horse meat contained considerably more iron, Vitamin B12 and Omega 3 fatty acids than your average beef strip steak.

The Milan-born Murphy recalled childhood meals of “very sweet” and “very lean” horse meat in Italy. He said he wouldn’t put it on the menu of his U.S.-based restaurants, however, because “it would cause controversy and probably people wouldn’t want to eat it ... It’s a cultural difference.”

His comments came in response to the horse meat scandal of 2013, when a global outcry was sparked over reports that horse and pig meat had been mixed into meat labeled beef in Europe. That year, Ikea removed its signature Swedish meatballs from its European locations after traces of horse meat were detected in one batch.

Also that year, in a story titled “Appreciation Of the Horse, Well-Cooked,” New York Times correspondent David M. Herszenhorn interviewed a horse meat-loving Italian chef who runs a Moscow restaurant.

“The first item on the chalkboard posted by the door to Mr. (Valentino) Bontempi’s restaurant is a horse filet grilled on coals – a steak so tender, rich and delicious that a jury of avowed carnivores could easily be left palate-hung in a contest, say, with the porterhouse at Peter Luger’s,” he wrote.

In one corner of America where horse meat is consumed, it is viewed as less of a delicacy and more of a healing food. The Navajo Nation of the southwestern United States have harvested feral tribal horses since 1500, points out the Navajo Times in a 2013 story.

A Navajo cultural specialist described the meat as “mostly a way to combat the common cold and flu, and an alternative food source for families during the winter months.”

But unlike the horrid conditions described in this week’s raid on the Loxahatchee farms, the Navajo insert a spiritual element in the butchering of a horse, according to the story, which describes the process as told by one Navajo councilman:

“Before killing and eating the horse, (Olin) Kieyoomia said he and his father made an offering to the horse with corn pollen to thank it for providing nourishment. They placed the hide of the horse under a juniper tree in the Chuska Mountains.”