

OPINION

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COMMENTARY

Hanks: If you must eat animals, kill them with kindness

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We're quickly approaching "Turkey Day." That's shorthand for Thanksgiving, and it emphasizes the meat-centric-ness of the holiday. These days, the Pilgrims are mere Yankee window-dressing to the "Festival of Turkey."

Thanksgiving is just one of many meaty American holidays that are "interesting" for a vegetarian. As a longtime vegetarian Texan — and having been raised in an extremely carnivorous family — I know being vegetarian means being cause for concern as a dinner guest. Though I'm plushly upholstered and in little danger of starvation, hosts often fret they won't have anything to feed me.

It also means hardly anyone comes to eat at our house — doubtless terrified they'll encounter some vegetarian horror of Brussels sprouts, beet turnovers and prune cobbler. Instead, they'd get Frito Pie, made with veggie chili.

Some vegetarians and vegans — strict vegetarians who eat no animal products such as butter and cheese — refuse to have meat inside their homes. I'm comparatively lazy, or maybe just worn down by carnivore culture. That's why tomorrow I'll likely be the only vegetarian picking up my Thanksgiving turkey at the Alexander Family Farm.

Why?

I'm hosting family Thanksgiving, and there's no way my parents will settle for vegetarian Tofurky, the often-mocked tofu turkey substitute. If I'd gotten the complete Tofurky Vegetarian Feast at Whole Foods for \$26.99, complete with "Tofurky Jurky Wishstix," the only thing Milton and Joan would be wishing for would be a real turkey.

As a non-meat-eater, I know trying to convince others to abandon the practice is as pointless as pulling publicity-photo-hound/heirress Paris Hilton away from a pulsating pack of paparazzi. Yet, if you're going to eat meat, I want you to look beyond the carnivore-industrial complex. (That's the triple-threat of multinational agri-business, feedlots and gargantuan slaughterhouse/meatpacking plants).

Thus, I was delighted to see the Austin Film Society premiere of "Fast Food Nation" at Austin's Paramount Theatre last Tuesday, before opening across the country this past weekend.

"Fast Food Nation" is based on Eric Schlosser's 2001 book of investigative journalism by the same name. In the film, Schlosser and Austin director Richard Linklater ("Slacker," "A Scanner Darkly") tell stories that spiral outward from the fast-food industry. These include tales of undocumented immigrants exploited by meatpacking firms, and the unnatural diet and stressful lives of animals in the carnivore-industrial complex.

The film's climatic scene is footage from a commercial slaughterhouse, where the actors were filmed in a working Mexican abattoir. Studying the audience during that scene, I saw more horror and disgust than at the slaughterhouse-slasher flick "Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning." In front of me, Kasey Glantz, 24, of San Marcos was barely holding back tears watching animal blood being spilled.

Because few Americans still live on farms, we've forgotten, as The Smiths 1985 album reminds us, "Meat is Murder." Your steak once walked around on its own. So did your Thanksgiving turkey.

"Even if you eat meat, and you've comes to grips with it, it's shocking and repellent," said Austinite T.J. Shroat, 36, about the movie's slaughterhouse scene. Linklater noted during the post-film Q&A, that's just another brutal day at the office for slaughterhouse workers.

Whole Foods has taken a lot of ribbing about their new Animal Compassionate labeling, focusing on the way that animals were raised. The labeling is mocked as being for the "sensitive carnivore."

This noncarnivore is tickled about the new standards. Anything that connects plastic-wrapped meat to once-breathing animals is a plus for me.

Strangely for a vegetarian, I don't have a problem with responsible hunting, fishing or lobstering because the animal was free until it was food. While I can't stop others from eating meat, I want their food to suffer as little as possible.

I don't want laying hens spending their entire lives in cages smaller than this newspaper page, or hogs having their curly tails cut just so their tails won't get infected when bitten by other cranky, overcrowded hogs. I don't want cattle standing in their own waste at feedlots.

Why let animals suffer just so corporations can make more money? It's wrong. My position is supported by Michael Pollan in his fantastic book "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals."

While we'll spend Thanksgiving celebrating gluttony, if you'll be eating meat, please consider meat that had a chance to live a good life before being dispatched to your dinner table. A good start is looking for chow from local farmers market participants.

Or consider a Tofurky. Only \$26.99 with all the fixin's, including "Jurky Wishstix!"

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