

The Year of the Bunny

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CHRONICLE

By Anna Hanks

APRIL 5, 1999: Ah, it's spring! Nevermind that freaky Austin weather has had us swimming since January; spring proper is marked by the arrival of a certain long-eared, short-tailed burrowing mammal. March may come in like a lion and go out like a lamb, but in the meantime it looks a lot like a bunny.

News & Opinion Apart from the myriad charms of our furry friend, even the word "bunny" is lovely. Try it. Say "Bunny, bunny," aloud a few times. Roll it about on your tongue. It even feels pastel -- with hints of celery and spun sugar.

And then there is the magical bunny himself. Call it bunny sexism, but most of the bunnies hopping around in the land of commerce appear to be male -- except, of course, for those in Hugh Hefner's hutch.

Playboy partying aside, the bunny is undoubtedly the centerpiece of the secular Easter -- a holiday that is closer to a pagan rite of spring than to a floating highlight of the church calendar. In all of my studious scouring of store shelves, I found but one lonely hollow chocolate cross. Go where you want with that.

According to Easter legend, eggs on Easter eve are delivered by the Easter Bunny -- an aurally endowed Santa who doesn't care if you've been good or not. Alarmingly, the combination of bunny delivery and non-union egg-producing shop may lead someday to a hen uprising. These ladies do all the work, after all, and, at least in this country, the bunny gets all the credit. You heard it here first.

No doubt the popularity of hollow chocolate bunnies during the Easter season has much to do with capitalism and the corporate maximization of profits. Yet the allure of champing down on those tender milk-chocolate ears is not to be dismissed. That satisfying crunch almost makes Lent worth the effort. An informal survey of a few Sunday night shoppers at the local HEB reveals two important facts: About half the people polled prefer their bunnies hollow, and, to a one, when indulging in said bunny, they prefer to start with the ears. One wag added, "If you see someone bite off the face first, you know they've got issues."

Friends have speculated that this overwhelming preference toward "starting with the ears" has something to do with the ears being the most distinguishable feature of the bunny -- the part that sets him apart from all the other animals. Others have speculated that it is because that is the part of the bunny that most easily fits into the mouth. Either way, the ears have it.

To heighten this exquisite ear experience, there is even a "Bunny Big Ears" made by

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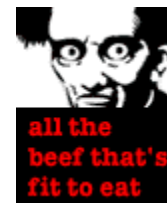


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Palmer. With the saying "Truly *ear*-resistible!" on the box, this bunny has ears longer than his bunny torso. According to the Bunny Big Ears that I bought -- strictly for research purposes mind you -- the length of the total bunny measures one (lucky!) foot. The torso measures 4³*4", and the ears measure a good 7" -- although they appear to be even longer in the vertical box. And according to Cecil Adams in *More of the Straight Dope*, the average human male member is about 6.3". It looks like the nice folks at Palmer took the idea that rabbits represent fecundity and regeneration and ran with it.



The obvious phallic implications of Bunny Big Ears are only enhanced by the self-satisfied look in his candy blue eyes -- eyes fixated on his monstrous bunny appendage, as if to say, "Whoa, dude! Look what I grew!" Think of him as the bunny Dirk Diggler. After all, "Bunny Big Ears" is clad only in a ribbon and a smile.

Actually Bunny Big Ears isn't alone in his nakedness. Most of the other bunnies appear to be wearing only a ribbon around their necks, a look that only emphasizes their lack of clothing. Oh, sometimes they are hiding coyly behind an Easter egg or willow basket, but naked they are, just the same. How else would there be more and more chocolate bunnies on store shelves every year? Of the bunnies that are dressed, they seem to prefer dressing either in overalls or as faux 19th-century French peasants.



illustration by Jason Stout

This Easter comes during the Chinese Year of the Rabbit -- a cultural fact brought home by the recent postal increase and brand new 33¢ Year of the Rabbit commemorative stamps (I've licked more bunny butts this year than I ever thought possible). One of the more troubling aspects of this conjunction comes because of what the rabbit symbolizes -- fertility.

Even more troubling is the fact that this year Easter Sunday is only days away from what the British press is calling "Boink Night." This April, millions will attempt to conceive the first child to be born in the new millennium. Doubtless, these Boink Night babies will suffer overcrowded kindergartens and lots of competition selling Girl Scout cookies. Worse yet, they will suffer one of the worst fates of modern childhood -- having to fight for Easter eggs at an Easter egg hunt.

Of course the concept "bunny" is not limited to the Easter season; it is with us throughout the rest of the year. We have Roger Rabbit and Bugs Bunny. We have the bunny slope for novice skiers, the bunny hop for the retro dance faction, and rabbit ears on our TVs. *Bunny* won the Oscar for best animated short film this year. "Going down the rabbit hole" is Lewis Carroll shorthand for going to a mysterious, unknown place, and no one in a waistcoat can check the time without visually alluding to the white rabbit. In some parts of the country, you can buy Blue Bunny ice cream. The name of the gift shop next to my favorite truck stop in La Grange is "Hunny Bunny's." And a pretentious graduate student might offer you a Welsh rarebit instead of a

cheese sandwich.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter is a classic -- same with *Peter Cottontail*, *Pat the Bunny*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, and *The Country Bunny & the Little Gold Shoes*. The tale of Br'er Rabbit was popular in the earlier part of the century. These are but a few of the rabbit-themed formative children's tales available.

Of course, the bunny doesn't have the same symbolism in all cultures. A French friend tells me that in France it is difficult to decide what is the most popular Easter chocolate -- the bunny, the chick, or the egg. Fish are popular as well, a trend to which even the more affected haven't cottoned around here. These treats are often filled with "*friture*," or small eggs or animals (usually shrimp, shells, fish, etc.) also made of chocolate.

Of course, people in other cultures *eat* actual rabbits far more often than do most Americans. Mention the noble *lapin* in a French restaurant and you're likely to wind up with a stewed one on your plate. A Francophone African scholar at Stanford University tells me that in French-speaking parts of Africa, rabbits are so commonly eaten, that they are used to explain other tastes. When he was in the Ivory Coast, a former French possession in West Africa, he was served *agouti*, or bush rat. His hostess told him that "it tastes just like rabbit."

But as lovely as bunnies are as a symbol, their magic tends to dissipate when introduced into a domestic setting. Buying a rabbit at Easter is a lot like making a new friend after last call: They both look a lot cuter before you get them home.

Except for the dedicated hardcore bunny fancier, rabbits are not pets. Buy a rabbit for a small child, and you deserve the bunny shit you'll have on the sofa for the next decade. Like almost all potent magical symbols, bunnies are best not in reality but in image -- very best of all being a hollow, high-dollar rabbit sitting in my very own Easter basket (sigh) from a chic chocolate shop.

Strangely, the local chocolate purveyor The Three Chocolatiers sells what owner Glenn Scott refers to as "The Monster Bunny" -- 21 pounds of solid chocolate which retails for \$110. This monster rabbit is made from the same mold used at the White House. I don't know about you, but given everything that the rabbit symbolizes, I hope that our wayward president doesn't start with those monster bunny ears. Lord help us all if he does. The thought of Kenneth Starr handing the Easter Bunny a subpoena makes my teeth ache.

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