

Rethinking Meat

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My family's latest "green" project? Rethinking meat. This hasn't been easy. I grew up on pot roast. My daughters love broiled chicken, grilled pork chops, and pizza with sausage, thank you very much, and so does my husband.

Food safety is one reason we're rethinking meat. These days, knowing where my food comes from isn't culinary snobbery, it's practical. As I write, three USDA meat recalls have occurred within the last four weeks because of potentially fatal E. coli and salmonella outbreaks (check out the website www.foodshield.org for more information about all food recalls).

At the supermarket, I don't know how many miles my hamburger traveled to get there. I don't know how fresh it is or if the package contains meat from one cow or several. Though I've asked, the people behind the meat counter don't seem to know either.

Climate change is another reason we're rethinking meat. Our food choices remarkably impact the planet. The Center for Food Safety and the Union of Concerned Scientists, along with many other organizations, recommend eating less meat to reduce global warming.

The Union of Concerned Scientists claims that, compared with other protein sources like beans or soy, "livestock production is more resource-intensive: it takes three pounds of grain (as livestock feed) to produce one pound of chicken, and seven to

ten pounds of grain to produce one pound of beef. As a result, it generates more heat-trapping emissions (including nitrous oxide from grain production and methane released by cows and other ruminants) than plant-based foods grown specifically for human consumption" (www.ucsusa.org). Scientists at Carnegie Mellon University estimate that 60 percent of greenhouse gases emitted from world food production come from the production of animals into edibles.

Feeding our future food takes resources too. The Center for Food Safety estimates that of all the grains and seeds grown in the United States every year, livestock (including beef, hogs, poultry, and even fish) eat *half* of that total amount. The crops used to produce that feed require tons of fertilizer—around 14 billion pounds—and producing fertilizer also releases greenhouse gas emissions. Unsettling facts in a world full of hungry people.

In attempting to change our habits, my family has been asking these questions, courtesy of the Center for Food Safety's Cool Foods Campaign:

Is this food organic? Organic meats contain fewer pesticides and fertilizers, both big producers of greenhouse gas emissions.

Is this product made from an animal? To cut back, we "go meatless" frequently, omitting meat from pasta dishes or using beans instead of beef in chili. With the onset of fall, a delicious vegetable chowder and freshly baked bread will make a filling repast.

Has this food been processed? My daughter Claire's personal chef is Chef Boyardee. To break this habit, during busy weeks I try to prepare meals in my Crockpot so that we have something good waiting for us when we get home.

How far did this food travel to reach my plate? I look for local suppliers who raise their meat sustainably—usually grass-fed or free-range. This takes more legwork, but it also takes the worry out of Sunday dinner. When I can, I buy in bulk and freeze, which saves trips. The website www.eatwell-guide.org provides information on local suppliers.

Is this food excessively packaged? Plastic food packaging often cannot be recycled. I try to pick fruits and vegetables from bins rather than buying packaged produce, and I ask the people at the meat counter to avoid using Styrofoam. One happy result—less trash!

Cutting back on our meat consumption was a major change for my family, and it took some research on my part—new recipes, new ingredients, and some experimentation. But I've discovered how tasty meat can be, and it's worth paying a little extra, especially when we eat it less. Preparing a roast from a quality supplier, knowing I'm supporting a family farm or a cruelty-free, sustainable business, I appreciate it twice as much. I'll gladly eat less meat if I can enjoy it more. ■

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