



The Abattoir's Call: At the Margins of New York City's Foodie Movement

Richard E. Ocejo

Food-conscious urban consumers often ask their butcher where their meat comes from. But how many wonder about the form of death the animals were put through? Richard Ocejo gives a rare glance at a link in the food chain that remains an unglamorous mystery.

Open kitchens in trendy restaurants, countless chef, cooking, and food-related television shows, artisanal food carts, and whole animal butcher shops. As food culture has grown, how food gets made has become more glamorous. Knowing about food and how to make it have become status symbols in a world of omnivorous tastes, in which the values that make food “good” have changed (Johnston and Baumann 2010). People in cities increasingly want more transparency. They want to see and know more about where their food comes from and how it gets made, even to the point of becoming producers by growing their own herbs and vegetables and canning their own goods.

A notable exception has been slaughtering animals, which remains out of sight, hidden from the public (Pachirat 2011). A look at who provides the meat for New York City's foodie scene reveals both physical and social distance.

Cool Halal

Most people don't think of Ozone Park, a working- and lower-middle-class neighborhood in Queens, when they think of places to visit in New York City. It used to be a stronghold for the Italian mafia (John Gotti used to run things). Latinos and South Asians mainly live there now. On a rainy Monday afternoon, I ride the A train through Brooklyn, the city's hip destination borough of the moment, and get off at the far-flung Rockaway Boulevard station. I walk several blocks down 100th Street, passing auto body shops and warehouses, and come to two squat buildings with a driveway between them. A bright green sign reading “Madani Halal” adorns the left side, and the sound and smell of chickens emanate out of its wide-open garage-style door.

“Do you know how to talk to chickens?” asks an old white-bearded man in a kufi sitting in a chair by the entrance.

“Do I know how to talk to chickens?”

“Yeah, do you know how to talk to chickens?”

“I don't. Do you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do they talk back?”

“Yes.”

“There's one,” I say, pointing to a stray.

“He's lost. It's fine.”

Before I can ask what the chickens say to him, a rooster crows, letting out an alarmingly accurate “cock-a-doodle-doo.”

“Shut up! I’m not talking to you,” he shouts.

After immigrating from Bangladesh in the 1950s and working in the nightclub industry, Riaz, my new friend, opened Madani Halal in 1992, and moved into the current location in 1996. He is now semi-retired, and Imran, his son, who shows up ten minutes after my arrival, runs the business. Heavysset and in his mid-thirties, Imran grew up in Ozone Park and went to Clark University. After a stint in the AmeriCorps, he returned to New York and worked in advertising at NBC. The friendly emails, gifts, and party invitations from clients stopped when he switched positions from primetime to children’s television, which taught Imran about the fickleness of relationships in the corporate world. Just as he was growing disillusioned with his professional life, his father called to ask if he wanted to take over the family business, giving him just two hours to make his decision. Imran quit his job and started working at the slaughterhouse the next day. “It was the happiest day of my life,” he says.

On a tour of the facility, Imran explains what halal is all about. “It’s similar to kosher in that there are many levels to it. Much of halal is common sense and deals with cleanliness and sanitation and how to kill the animal. But what we do is not just with killing the animal, but an entire lifestyle. Keeping halal starts with how the animal gets raised, how it is treated, how the animal is transported, and if the farmers you’re dealing with are trustworthy business people.”

I observe many of the process’s traditional steps: they always say a prayer before slaughtering the animal, they do not allow other animals to see the animal being slaughtered, they do not allow the animals to see the knife being sharpened, and they always face Mecca when they do the slaughtering. Imran emphasizes “respecting” the animal in the spiritual sense, but also because he believes proper halal meat tastes better. He chastises another halal slaughterhouse he once visited where the guy said a prayer before turning on a machine in which the chickens are locked into a conveyor belt, and then an automated blade system kills them. This method is one “level,” or interpretation, of halal, but not what he considers halal.

According to Imran, only 15–20% of Madani’s sales are to “city businesses.” Their halal practice coincidentally dovetails perfectly with New York City’s tremendous foodie culture, which includes the notion that locally and humanely raised animals from small farmers represent “good” meat. Madani supplies poultry and goat to such lauded restaurants as M. Wells, Fedora, Left Bank, Fatty Cue, and the Breslin, and to the high-end butcher shops Meat Hook and Dickson’s Farmstand Meats in Chelsea Market, the upscale foodie emporium in Manhattan. Owners and chefs of these and other places at the vanguard of the city’s food movement seek out certain storylines for their products and motifs. “Local,” “sustainable,” “authentic,” and “exotic” pepper their menus and websites and get spread around to customers by the food media (Johnston and Baumann 2010). Madani appeals to these sensibilities. And with Imran at the helm, who went to college, worked in corporate America, and is familiar with the foodie culture of Brooklyn and Manhattan, it has a leader who can bridge the wide gap between the city’s immigrant margins and its hip cultural center.

The remaining 80% of Madani’s customers, the ones who Imran cares about the most, are people from ethnic groups who mainly live nearby in Queens and Brooklyn and keep halal, prefer certain breeds, and/or are used to buying freshly slaughtered animals. “Immigrants (...) could go to the supermarket and get chicken for 79 cents a pound. They’d rather come here and spend \$2.39 a pound to have the taste of home.” I observe many of these customers coming in as part of their daily routine and waiting for their order during my visit.

“There’s not a lot of reward or recognition,” says Imran of his work. “Chefs, butchers, they get attention. But not the farmers, the feeders, the people who slaughter and eviscerate the animal. If the entire food industry were like the theater, we would be like the stage crew, working in the background. But the best reward I get is knowing that people are enjoying the food that I worked on.”

“Is that what you like the most about being in the business?”

“It is. There is so much satisfaction in coming home and sitting around to eat. Knowing I had something to do with that, that’s my satisfaction.”

Rural Hipness

I get up at 4 a.m. and drive for two hours on two interstates until I get to Albany, where I head west. Then it’s all country roads through New York state’s farm country to the Double L Ranch. After a few twists and turns I come to a low-slung white building at a lazy intersection, with an open field out back, an empty animal trailer, and two small trucks parked outside. There is no smell, no sound, no sign. A sun-bleached cow skull on a post stuck in the front lawn is perhaps the only indication that this is an abattoir. I later learn from Lowell, the owner, that the discretion is intentional. “I don’t need PETA coming around.”

Lowell is a sturdy man of average height in his fifties with graying hair. He is quick to smile and laugh, with rugged hands that have seen hard work. He wears a backward Oakland Raiders cap and a white butcher coat over an orange 2012 biker rally T-shirt. Originally from upstate New York, he worked as a cook and chef in many kitchens, and along the way picked up butchery skills from places that ordered whole animals. For several years, he ran the career training and certificate program called “Meat Processing and Food Safety” at the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Agriculture and Technology at Cobleskill, a rare formal learning environment for butchery skills.

The Double L Ranch building’s previous occupant slaughtered old dairy cows for bologna. Today, popular farmers’ markets around the state, but especially in the global city 100 miles to the south, yearn to sell local meat to knowledgeable foodie customers. Raising animals for their meat has therefore become potentially profitable for small farmers. Lowell recognized this trend and filled an emerging demand. Among Lowell’s customers is Dickson’s Farmstand Meats. Jake, Dickson’s owner, worked at the Double L Ranch before he opened his shop to learn about butchery and the meat production process. Part of what makes these shops upscale and examples of the “new elite” in retail is their celebration and promotion of what constitutes “good” meat and how meat “should” be made. By working with local farmers and treating animals humanely, Double L Ranch satisfies many of their underlying values.

Two cows and fifteen lambs are on today’s docket, a busy day, but the abattoir could handle a slightly heavier load. (The factory-like slaughterhouse where Pachirat (2011) conducted his research slaughtered 2,500 cows per day.) Two men run the kill floor: Zach, Lowell’s son, and Walt, his nephew. They both wear navy blue jumpsuits, rubber boots that come up just below the knees, and a rubber apron (Zach also has on a Harley Davidson helmet; Walt’s is a standard safety helmet). Zach and Walt both went to Mohawk Valley Community College, where they received associate’s degrees in fields they did not seriously pursue. The family business beckoned.

Zach uses a broom to push the gore and blood from the last cow into the drain. He goes through a red door into the animal pen area. After a minute he comes back through the door, puts on a set of earmuffs, grabs the bolt gun, loads it, and opens the gate leading to the pen. Four lambs huddled together look frightened. Zach matter-of-factly grabs one and holds it firmly, steadying its head. He points the bolt gun downward and shoots, letting out a loud bang and stunning the lamb. He then walks over to one of the hooks hanging down from the high ceiling, and with a nylon loop captures one of the lamb’s hind legs. He then hits a button that elevates the lamb. Still stunned, the lamb barely moves. Zach takes his knife out of his scabbard, grabs the lamb’s head by the wool, and slits

its throat. Blood immediately sprays arterially and the lamb shakes and dangles on the rope. Zach puts a loop around its other leg. The animal is now completely upside down, which speeds along the death. He leaves the lamb hanging, dripping, while he prepares another.

After slaughtering all four, Zach and Walt remove their head, hooves, and hide, and then eviscerate them. I have an anatomy question.

“What’s that?”

“That’s the pluck,” he says. “It’s the lungs, heart, windpipe, and esophagus.”

A beat goes by as Zach has a torn look, like he’s not sure if he wants to tell me something.

“Want to see something cool?” he finally asks excitedly. I nod.

Zach removes a knife from his scabbard and slices off the top of the windpipe of the pluck he just removed from a lamb carcass, and puts the fresh end in his mouth. He then blows into it, and the lungs expand like balloons. They deflate, and he inflates them again. He then wipes his mouth, spits into the sink, tosses the pluck onto the wheelbarrow, and comes over to me smiling. I notice he still has some organ detritus near his mouth.

“Is that sanitary?” I ask.

“For me? Oh yeah, it’s fine.”

Despite the popularity of foodie culture and growing interest in the process of food production, the act of killing animals, maybe the most morally ambiguous role in the food world, remains unglamorous, and perhaps unglamorizable, unable to move beyond the dirty work and ethical dilemmas. Small slaughterhouses like Madani and the Double L Ranch represent unique places where hip city culture meets both immigrant and rural economies, but the bridges connecting them are not well traveled. Their direct connection with death and slaughter keeps the work of these local artisanal craftsmen far from the view of the foodie elite.

Bibliography

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Richard E. Ocejo earned his doctorate in sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center and joined the faculty at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, as an assistant professor in fall 2009. His primary research interests are on the interrelationship between culture and economy in contemporary cities. Ocejo specifically uses the formation of nightlife scenes as an analytical lens for examining a broad range of urban issues, such as gentrification, contestations over community, the use of public space, the formation of cultural communities, and urban growth policies.

He is under contract to publish a book on his research on conflicts over nightlife on the Lower East Side with Princeton University Press. He has also conducted research on social interactions in the public space of the subway. Ocejo is currently working on a research project that examines the reinvention and incorporation of new cultural meanings into old working-class occupations. This ongoing work focuses on the attitudes and practices of people in several of these occupations to reveal emerging patterns of cultural production and consumption and the changing nature of cultural work in the postindustrial economy. He is also the editor of a reader of classic and contemporary urban ethnographies published by Routledge in 2012.

To quote this article:

Richard E. Ocejo, “The Abattoir’s Call: At the Margins of New York City’s Foodie Movement”, *Metropolitiques*, 17 November 2014. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Abattoir-s-Call-At-the-Margins.html>.