

NATURE'S PERFECT PACKAGE

Labeling our way to a clear conscience

By James McWilliams

Sample the high-end food markets in any progressive U.S. city—Austin, Berkeley, Portland—and you'll find consumers who care deeply about the lives of the animals they eat. These self-proclaimed "compassionate carnivores" reject the alienation of industrial agriculture. They want the farm close to the fork, and they want the fork to dig in to animals that were treated well. How were they raised? Did they live on a pasture? Could they peck for grubs? Where and how were they killed?

The foremost obstacle in this quest for culinary transparency is that it's in no one's economic interest to provide clear answers to such questions. As a result, the labels created to assure thoughtful carnivores rely on euphemisms that salve our consciences while obscuring the realities of raising, killing, and eating animals. The pattern began in the 1990s, with terminology describing space. "Cage free," first applied to the living conditions of egg-laying hens, has an appealing anti-industrial ring, but the USDA's designation requires no restrictions on stocking density. The typical cage-free farm packs thousands of chickens into enclosures that provide one or two square feet of floor space per bird.

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"Free range" labels require the "grow-out facility" (i.e., barn) to provide *theoretical* access to the great outdoors, but conditions are otherwise much the same. Most free-range birds spend their truncated lives trapped inside the facility. Birds that do make it out are likely to discover a sad patch of mud; chickens on an open farm can roam for miles. Of course, they could have it worse. The labels themselves apply only to the hens at free-range and cage-free egg farms. Male chicks born in breeding facilities that supply these hens are often simply dropped alive into grinders.

The more sophisticated compassionate carnivores, having become aware of these shortcomings, now clamor for ever more detailed assurances about the lives of the animals they eat. Thus the emergence of "welfare approved" labels. These increasingly popular designations purport to provide a comprehensive assessment of a farm animal's experience. But they can be just as misleading as the more established descriptions of space. American Humane Certified is a label once overseen by Tim Amlaw, an "agriculture industry veteran" who came to welfare certification from a career in the cattle business and now runs a sustainable-food production company. The American Humane Certified label allows for cattle fattened in feed yards, sows secured in gestation stalls,

and chickens that never see a pasture. A competing label, Certified Humane, mandates considerably tougher standards but still permits animals to be slaughtered in industrial abattoirs, castrated without anesthesia, mutilated through dehorning and beak trimming, and restricted to a life indoors.

A welfare label that many consumers are likely to have seen comes from the Global Animal Partnership, which offers a tiered rating system (1 to 5+). Every ounce of pork, chicken, and beef sold by Whole Foods is currently GAP certified, but farmers need to meet only Level 1 requirements to carry the coveted label and break the Whole Foods barrier.

GAP regulations for pigs are certainly respectable by big-industry standards, but it's readily evident why such terms as "welfare" and "humane" are omitted from the partnership's name. A Level 1 rating requires neither access to the outdoors nor periods of darkness for animals to sleep; it allows septum rings and ear notching; it does not set air-quality standards and demands no environmental enrichment; and its stipulations don't extend to the slaughter phase. In theory, GAP's tiered system encourages the gradual improvement of welfare standards, but farmers have no real incentive to increase their rating once their products are on the shelves at Whole Foods.

In their flexibility and variability, these labels may actually encourage a race to the bottom. Heather Lange, the director of Purpose Group International, a nonprofit based in Canada that once offered the most rigorous welfare certification in North America, moved out of the business because "labels have done little to break the stranglehold of industrial farming." PGI found that many companies failed to enforce the claims on its labels, and discovered widespread cheating among farm marketing groups. Gene Baur, president of the factory-farm watchdog organization Farm Sanctuary, admires the intentions behind welfare labeling; he says that the ratings "speak to our aspirations," but he also describes them as "marketing efforts designed to help farms sell products." Karen Davis, the president of United Poultry Concerns, another advocacy group, calls welfare labels "laughable," "a betrayal of public trust," and a "cheapening of language."

Take the case of Niman Ranch, long considered synonymous with humanely raised meat. Niman was at one time certified by Animal Welfare Approved, among the nation's strictest certifiers. As Niman expanded, however, AWA "tightened up the rules," according to Niman's executive vice president, Jeff Tripician. At issue was the use of something called a Swedish bedding system, an arrangement that provides sows access to individual feeding stalls and ample material for bedding, but keeps them indoors. Niman, which had been using the system on some farms, wanted to retain the option of using it; AWA, however, stopped certifying this form of confinement. As Andrew Gunther, AWA's program director, put it, "The welfare of pigs is at its highest when the animals are kept outdoors." Whatever the pros and cons of the Swedish bedding system, the upshot is that Niman and AWA no longer work together.

Officials at both organizations refuse to discuss the details of their divorce. What we do know, though, is that Niman eventually remarried. It turned to GAP, whose more accommodating rating system better suited the company's expansion. When I

asked Tripician what would spur Niman's Level 1 GAP producers to ascend the ratings ladder, he said, "We don't ask them to be rated higher." Paul Willis, who directs Niman Ranch Pork Company, acknowledges that the lack of incentive to move from 1 to 5+ is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Labeling agencies are run, we are told, by people dedicated to improving the lives of farm animals. If they push hard enough, perhaps we'll eventually peer into even the most humane farms and decide that it isn't worth killing an animal that doesn't want to die so we can eat food we don't really need.

Of course, a less earnest—and more realistic—interpretation of welfare labeling is that big producers don't want anyone to examine the guts of what they do, that consumers are happy to see what they want to see, and that all the pleasant-sounding ratings and stamps now decorating our grocery stores serve to make us feel a little bit better about this corrupt bargain. But that's a story that doesn't really fit on a label. ■

August Index Sources

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