America’s Obsession With Cheap Meat

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In the hierarchy of essential things in America, it appears, cheeseburgers rank near the top. The president’s recent declaration that meatpacking plants are “critical infrastructure” and meat is “essential” under the Defense Production Act speaks volumes about this country’s attachment to an abundant supply of beef and pork even amid a pandemic.

That President Trump rushed to issue an executive order that aims to keep meat processors on the job, while hesitating to take similar action to ramp up the manufacturing of protective gear for medical workers, no doubt reflects the influence of lobbyists for the meat industry. But there’s something else to consider. The perceived essentialness of cheeseburgers (and other meat products) is also a function of certain distinctly American food habits and beliefs.

Both have deep roots. Though strongly influenced by Britain, 19th-century American cuisine differed from the motherland in at least two important respects. In her 1832 travel book, “Domestic Manners of the Americans,” the English writer Frances Trollope describes the breathtaking quantities of food on American dinner tables. Even tea, she reports, is a “massive meal,” a lavish spread of many cakes and breads and “ham, turkey, hung beef, apple sauce and pickled oysters.”

Equally impressive to this foreign observer were the carnivorous tendencies of her American hosts. “They consume an extraordinary amount of bacon,” she writes, while “ham and beefsteaks appear morning, noon and night.”

Americans were indiscriminate in their love for animal protein. Beef, pork, lamb and mutton were all consumed with relish. However, as pointed out by the food historian Harvey Levenstein, it was beef, the form of protein preferred by the upper class, “that reigned supreme in status.” With the opening of the Western frontier in the mid-19th century, increased grazing land for cattle lowered beef prices, making it affordable for the working class.

Dietary surveys conducted at the turn of the 20th century by Wilbur Atwater, father of American nutrition, revealed that even laborers were able to have beefsteak for breakfast. As Atwater was quick to point out, a high-protein diet

set American workers apart from their European counterparts. On average, Americans ate a phenomenal 147 pounds of meat a year; Italians, by contrast, consumed 24.

“Doubtless,” Atwater wrote, “we live and work more intensely than people do in Europe.” The “vigor, ambition and hopes for higher things” that distinguished the American worker, he argued, was fed by repeated helpings of T-bone and sirloin steak.

During World War I, the idea that American vitality was tied to a meat-heavy diet dictated how the troops were fed. To give them a fighting edge, tremendous quantities of beef and pork were shipped overseas, enough to provide soldiers with 20 ounces of beef a day or 12 ounces of bacon. The cost was staggering, but the Army refused to trim meat rations. As one newspaper reported: “There will be no meatless days in the army. The Huns are going to find themselves up against beef-eaters and pork-fed fighters full of that savage strength that come from fried steak and boiled ham and crisped bacon.”

It’s no coincidence that the archetypal American hero, the cowboy, is a cattle herder, or that we claim hamburgers as the quintessential American food. Or that when Mr. Trump welcomed the 2019 football college champions to the White House, he offered themBig Macs and Quarter Pounders. Much of what has defined us as Americans is expressed through our meat consumption.

When the coronavirus began sweeping through meat plants in Colorado, South Dakota and Pennsylvania, Mr. Trump acted quickly. The specter of meat shortages andhigher prices — along with some friendly persuasion from groups like the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association — prompted him to open the way to, in effect, forcing slaughterhouse employees to show up for work in a patently unsafe environment.

Mr. Trump’s move places inexpensive meat over the health and safety of the workers who produce it. Ever since the publication of Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” in 1906, we have known about those perils, and too often left them unchecked, our way of keeping meat prices down and profits up.

In more ways than one, our access to cheap meat has worked to our disadvantage. With a large piece of protein in the center of the plate, most often cooked in a frying pan, Americans never had to test their powers of culinary creativity.

We never developed preparations, so common in other cuisines, that turn humble, plant-based ingredients into high culinary art. A meat-rich diet also meant that Americans were disproportionately plagued by what people used to call “dyspepsia,” what we know today as indigestion.

For the benefit of all concerned, both workers and consumers, we should take this as our cue to rethink old eating habits and look at alternative traditions. We don’t have to look far for inspiration. In fact, it’s all around us, in the many immigrant cuisines that rely chiefly on vegetables, starches and legumes, and use meat strategically, as a kind of condiment.

Think, for example, of Chinese-American stir fries in which a few ounces of beef, a one-person serving for some of us, is cut into bite-size morsels, flash-cooked with snow peas and used to feed a family of four. Or consider the magic that Italian-American home cooks produce with a handful of beans and some macaroni. We have options that don’t require making workers risk their health.

Is a well-stocked meat freezer really more “essential” than a human life? Unfortunately, Mr. Trump’s decision suggests that for Americans, it is.

Jane Ziegelman is a co-author, with Andrew Coe, of “A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression.”

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