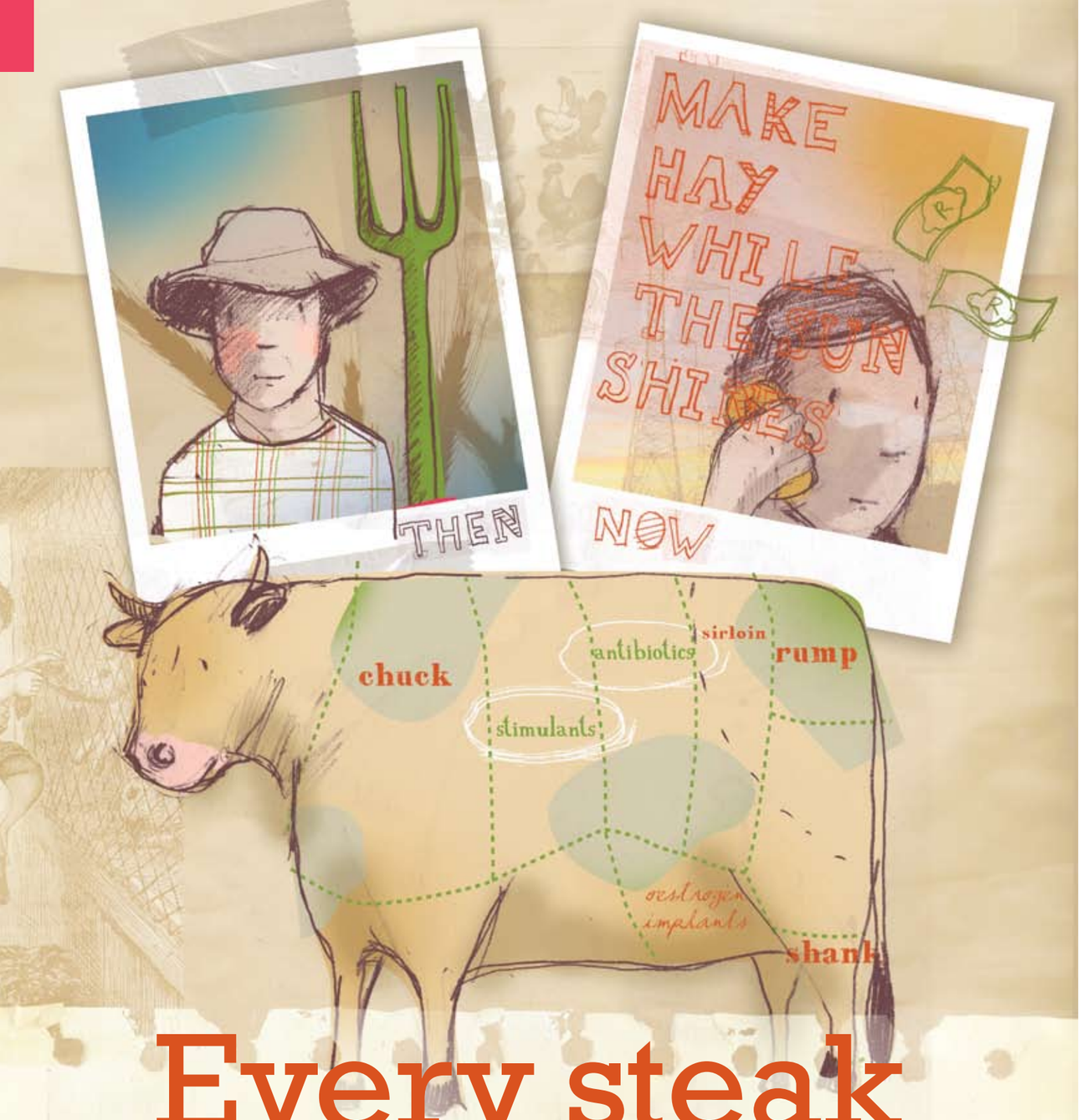



# Every steak has a story

Do you know where your meat comes from and what it contains? Pay more attention, says **Loren Anthony**, for the sake of your health

**En route to the KwaZulu-Natal** coast, we often stop at a little farm straight out of a storybook: old stone buildings, cowpats on the path and a rooster crowing at dawn. For breakfast, my children bring pillaged eggs, still warm in their palms, to owner Sheila's kitchen. There's always a jug of luxuriously thick milk on the breakfast table courtesy of the grazing cow herd. In our collective reverie, when we think of the word "farm", this is what we probably imagine.

Among all the things we've lost – and this is not a lament for the past – is the link between the farmyard animals that informed our childhood and the food that sits on our plates each day. What is the source of those rows of neatly packaged products in our supermarkets? Most of us think they come from that lovely, almost mythical farm, where animals are husbanded tenderly, and then humanely slaughtered by a compassionate farmer who knows each animal by name.

## The factory farm

The reality is far different. Today, unless you're buying free-range, organic meat from a bloke you personally know on a smallholding near you, you are probably eating, with a few exceptions*, mass-produced battery hens, pigs, feedlot cattle and sheep. Welcome to the factory farm. More factory than farm, thousands upon thousands of animals are processed here daily, on an unprecedented scale. The iconic farmer with his pitchfork has been replaced by the CEO with the cellphone.

Tozie Zokufa, SA representative for Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), believes "the sole purpose of factory farming is to make profit". Thousands of animals are often squeezed into the smallest possible space and fed the cheapest possible feed to promote the maximum amount of growth in the shortest possible time. They may also be given growth stimulants (steroids and hormones), and routinely fed antibiotics, because such unnatural husbandry, on such a scale, invariably leads to sick and stressed animals, with compromised immunity.

Cows, for example, are ruminants. Their entire digestive system is built for grass. When fed grain, they simply fail to thrive without the routine administering of drugs. Professor André Mentz, an animal scientist, argues that "perhaps 50 percent of bovine animals will die in a feedlot within three to five weeks if they had no preventative treatment, antibiotics and stimulants". Every time we reach for a ribeye steak, we are ingesting the drug residues of these animals, even if these are within the legal limit designated by the industry.

## The debate

Dave Ford, executive director of the SA Feedlot Association (SAFA), however, says that "providing consistently safe and healthy meat to the consumer" is a priority. He argues that factory farming is unavoidable because there is limited natural grazing in SA, and it is necessary to meet the food security demands of our growing population. Otherwise, he says, "South Africa will become a solely meat-importing country of meat of dubious origin and at highly inflated prices."

But welfare and environmental watchdogs say this argument is fallacious. Land currently used to grow feed for cattle could more productively be freed up for crops for human consumption, or for grazing for free-range farming. Seventy percent of all grain grown globally is used for animal, not human consumption. And food security needs can be adequately met through non-animal sources.

It's the very nature of factory farming – the sheer scale of it – that is problematic. Pigs under the industrial food system are kept indoors for their entire life, and are given antibiotics once weaned. Sows are artificially inseminated over and over again, and are kept in sow stalls where they are unable to turn around. Tail docking of pigs confirms that, in their crowded conditions, they begin to chew each other's tails out of frustration.

Dr Peter Evans, veterinary liaison officer for SA Pork, affirms that "the vast majority of pork farms are visited at least monthly by a pig veterinary consultant who ensures that the welfare of the animals is taken care of". Dr Evans argues that outdoor, free-range farming is difficult in South Africa "where the risk of sunburn is high. It also makes it difficult to visually check every pig every day to ensure that they are healthy".

Animal behaviour experts, however, argue that pigs, being far more intelligent than dogs, need the stimulation that foraging provides.

## Crying foul?

And what about the chicken and the egg? Each time we reach for a chicken breast, we are consuming an animal that has been injected with about 25 percent brine to increase its mass after slaughter. We are consuming an animal that never reached adolescence, and has been fed antibiotics to keep it alive. Laying chickens are debeaked in order to stop them cannibalising each other in their short, cramped lives.

Kevin Lovell, CEO of the Southern African Poultry Association, says that if antibiotics are used, the residue levels are set to international standards. Lovell draws on epigenetics to justify factory farming. "Major dietary traumas, particularly in childhood, can have effects on the expression of your genes which can

> "Without great ingredients you will never be able to make a great plate of food"

### WHO IS SELLING WHAT?

***Woolworths is the industry leader in ethical animal products. It banned battery eggs from its stores nationally in 2004 and currently stocks free-range chicken and meat, and organic eggs and dairy products. Spar, Checkers and Pick n Pay all stock free-range chicken and eggs. Industry watchdogs warn that the entire free-range industry is unregulated, and therefore your free-range may not be free range at all. The solution: visit the farms yourself; be a watchdog.**

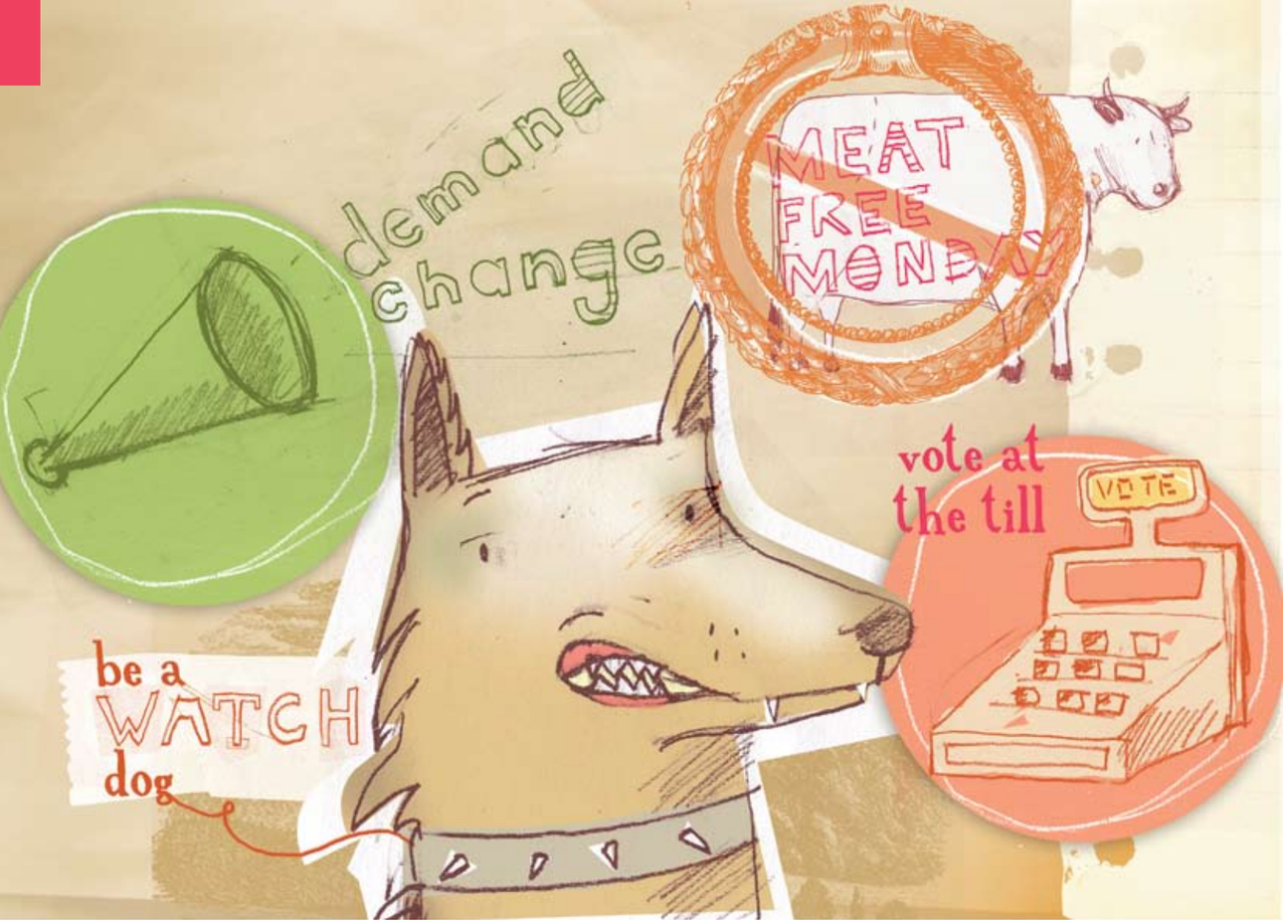



ILLUSTRATION ALTA STEGMAN

"We have this incredible blind spot around the food we eat. Perhaps it's because pleasure takes precedence over health"

be transferred to your children. Most of the developing world is protein deficient, and as a part of the developing world we should be cautious to accept as true the dictates of the developed world. Most South Africans need to eat more animal protein so our inherent potential can be reached."

Yet Professor Thandi Puoane of UWC School of Public Health argues that "the poor cannot afford to buy healthy meat. They end up buying cheap fatty meat, and this puts them at risk of vascular heart disease. For the sake of their health, they need to cut down on meat and replace it with dried beans and lentils".

Professor Puoane holds up her own youth, in rural KwaZulu-Natal, as a model for meat consumption. "My family slaughtered a sheep once a year at Christmas, and a chicken once a month."

But meat-eating has become a socially symbolic act now, a "status symbol" and so we demand more of it than we actually need.

## What are we really eating?

Even if the ethics of abusing and killing animals doesn't concern us much – and even if we're not particularly cut up by the fact that factory farming causes more environmental damage than all global transport emissions combined, according to a report by the Pew Commission – surely the thought of putting unhealthy meat in our mouths must prompt us to question what we're eating?

Ian Robinson, spokesman for the South African Organic Sector Organisation (SAOSO), argues that "whereas once we could see what went into growing the food we ate, whether it was plant or animal, today this is not the case. What happens now, out of our sight, is shocking in many ways. The food we once ate was healthy, non-toxic and full of nutrients, but today this is far from the norm."

We have this incredible blind spot around the food we eat. Perhaps it's because pleasure takes precedence over health, over environmental and animal welfare concerns; perhaps it's because we often eat for the wrong reasons – certainly not because we're hungry, and not because we want to nourish our bodies.

If we did the latter, we would ask of each mouthful: was it produced in a humane and healthy manner? Can I trust that it's good for me? We'll spend months hunting down a laptop, but we won't give the same level of investigation to our food. Ignorance has become our creed.

We're seeing rises in chronic diseases, in hormonal abnormalities, increasingly deadly viruses (swine flu, avian flu) that originate in factory farms and are transmissible to humans. We're seeing massive environmental damage. If these aren't warning signals that something is horribly wrong with our food production system, then what is? Thankfully, there are people who believe that ignorance is no longer sustainable in the face of such evidence.

## A food democracy

Justin Bonello, bush chef extraordinaire, is one person who refuses to be hoodwinked. Food is his passion, and so, in his televised show *Cooked*, he set out to search for its source. Bonello's first lesson from the master chefs of SA was that "without great ingredients you're never going to be able to make an amazing plate of food. These top chefs are all sourcing local ingredients from ethical suppliers, who are less about profit and more about looking after the planet". From there, Bonello visited battery and free-range chicken farms, feedlot and free-range cattle facilities, and even braved the horrors of the abattoir.

He argues that we've allowed ourselves to be duped "by placing our trust in suppliers who don't necessarily have our best interests at heart. It's time to take that all back and the way to do that is called a food democracy. We should be walking into every restaurant, fast-food joint and retailer and asking: Where does my food come from and what's in it? If they can't give you satisfactory answers, you should walk away and spend your hard-earned money on someone who can".

Louise van der Merwe's journey to ethical food began in 1989 when she moved her family to a smallholding "in an attempt at self-sufficiency". They bought 20 hens from a poultry farm to provide them with eggs but "when we unloaded them from their crates, we saw they had been debeaked". Van der Merwe's learnt that this was standard practice, and that, back then, there was "not a single free range egg to be had in SA". She became a woman on a mission. She attracted a group of like-minded people and Humanity for Hens was born. By the end of the '90s, they were official representatives of CIWF UK.

"If we are what we eat," she says, "then we're eating hormones; beef calves have oestrogen implants to make them put on weight more quickly. We're eating antibiotics; a random selection of broiler chickens around Cape Town showed they were all positive for the antibiotic tetracycline which is not dissipated by cooking; and we are eating stress and misery on a scale never known to man before."

Angus McIntosh is another visionary food figure. From stockbroker to stock farmer, McIntosh now farms organically and humanely at Spier, and he cannot keep up with demand. "The idea of being able to eat the food off our farm without concern for my children's health is thrilling. There is a growing demand from people who don't want to eat anonymous, genetically engineered corporate food. It's still a very small part of the market but the only one where there is real growth."

"The idea of being able to eat the food off our farm without concern for my children's health is thrilling"

## An alternative model?

So how do we counteract the claim, put out by the champions of agribusiness, that factory farming is a necessary evil in order to prevent food insecurity? McIntosh says "that ludicrous canard is perpetuated only by those who benefit from the industrial system. Just over 50 percent of the food produced in the world is thrown away. We don't have a volume production problem; as indicated by our sick population, we have a quality production problem".

South Africans tend to be passive consumers. A UNISA consumer study says this passivity is historically engendered – it's our fear of authority – but Justin Smith, Woolworths Good Business Journey manager, urges customers to "play a vital role in helping us make a difference to our country and our world, driving us to seek ever more socially and ecologically responsible solutions". Customers must demand the changes they want to see.

Perhaps the time has come for us to embrace an alternative model of eating. We need to move towards meat-free Mondays; eat seasonally and appreciate what's on our plate when we can get it; go back to a local market culture, where we can touch our food, choose it ourselves, and visit its source. We seem to have lost that. The way forward is simple: we need to eat with awareness. We need to vote at the tills. We need to affirm quality of life – our own, our children's and the animals we consume.

## TAKE ACTION

- **The Consumer Protection Act (April 2011) introduces compulsory detailed labelling of production methods on all products, and outlaws actions during the course of production and supply that would be "unconscionable" and "unethical to a degree that would shock the conscience of a reasonable person".**
- **Compassion in World Farming (SA) is bringing a class action suit against factory farming. To become part of this action, e-mail Louise van der Merwe on avoice@yebo.co.za or visit www.animal-voice.org**
- **Support Meat-free Mondays – visit www.supportmfm.co.za Cape Town is the first city in Africa to officially endorse one meat-free day a week.**
- **Join Bonello's Facebook group – The Great Food Hoodwink http://www.facebook.com/Justin.Bonello.Foodie**
- **Read www.activist.co.za**