

Is Rage Against Red Meat a Red Herring?



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ur steak, and eat it too! (Part I of IV)

I was never sure, exactly, what Machine those, who raged against it in the eponymously named band, raged against. I'm still not. But the Rage Against The Machine (RATM, for short) version of Bob Dylan's *Maggie's Farm* certainly suggests they are no fan of modern industrial agribusiness. I would be, personally, hard-pressed not to rage with them. For there seems to be, to my weather eye, a very modern bait and switch in which a cleaner and greener world is promised us upon the winds of sustainability and the addressing of climate change.

These Tradewinds loom large in the current world of food and health and blow strongly to carry us to greener shores. And that of course, *could* be a good thing – perhaps even a great thing. However, adrift at their mercy, we like Ulysses, may find these greener shores of our modern day Aeaia a dangerous illusion. Particularly, when it comes to the offered feast of

plant based pork-like crispy cracklins that a government appointed Circe sets before us.

And whilst we like to think these realms of what as individuals we choose to eat in terms of our preference and health sacrosanct; beyond the influence of corporate profit, political gain, and raw power, the fact remains that they are as vulnerable to such unwanted sway as any other human enterprise. Which is why it becomes incumbent upon us to scan the horizons and objectively examine the data.

And sometimes that means, as the saying goes, we must spit on our hands and hoist the black flag.

The consumption of red meat has once again come to the forefront in the crosshairs of public debate. This is not something new. However, this time the proposals come dressed as climate change and sustainability. Among considerations that *may* receive governmental approval and backing – and thus potential enforcement – include those from the Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems that propose cutting red meat consumption (beef) by 90% and decreasing the use of all animal products by 50%.[\[1\]](#) Basically, you would be allowed to eat one hamburger a month. Added to the draconian amendment, as a sort of free bonus gift – but wait! There's more... – is the promise of huge health benefits.

The wrangle over red meat, both for and against, generally comes in three flavors; climate change/sustainability, individual and population health, and ethical considerations. The latter is highly personal and does not easily lend itself to measurement and analysis. The second becomes a short conversation if we shift the *perspective* from which we value our food (for those interested, we discuss this at much greater length and in much greater detail in our University of Montana's [Introduction to Culinary Medicine Course](#)).

If we move beyond the oversimplified view of our comestibles

as fruit, grain, vegetable, fish, poultry, meat – and even red meat – then we see that the real devil hiding in the details is ultra-processed versus real, authentic, wholesome, and whole foods. This is easily espied using the NOVA classification, introduced in Brazil over a decade ago and now adopted by many countries across the globe, including the United Nations.

NOVA classifies the foods we eat by level of processing; Levels I through IV with the last being highly ultra-processed consumables. These Level IV products make up over 60% to 70+% of the average American's diet. Consumption of ultra-processed additives and products, primarily the product of Big Food, Big Snack, and Big Soda, clearly correlate with the risk of developing any number of – often in multiples – conditions that constitute and contribute to the current health crisis; morbid obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, neurodegenerative diseases, certain cancers, and you – unfortunately – know the list. Therefore, it really comes as no surprise that many, many studies with large numbers of people like the Harvard meta-analysis (over 1.2 million people worldwide) and the EPIC study (almost 500,000 people primarily from Europe) find *no* significant health detriments with *fresh* red meat (at any level of consumption) but a clear and linear correlation to risk of disease and death with the minimal addition of *highly processed* red meat to the plate.

For that reason, the remainder of this discussion will focus primarily upon the first topic of interest: must we eliminate red meat – with the primary emphasis on beef – to achieve sustainability and address climate change concerns?

[\[1\]](#) These proposals have **not** been adopted by the current administration, nor are they under 'official' consideration. It is provided as an example of plans put forth to reduce carbon emissions in accordance with the administration's stated goal of reducing such emissions by at least 50% by 2030.