



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

# MEAT MOBILIZATION

With consumer demand for local beef on the rise,  
it's time to rethink the slaughterhouse.

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Lucia Stout Huebner loves her cows. She wants them to have the best, healthiest life possible, right up to the moment they're slaughtered.

"I'm a meat eater," Huebner says. "And I'm a farmer. I sell meat. But I'm totally opposed to the way animals are raised in factories."

At Beechtree Farm in Hopewell Township, Lucia and her husband, Charlie, manage a herd of 40 beef cattle on 58 acres. Their Devons and Polled Herefords spend summer days grazing on green grass in open pastures. This is the alternative, not the norm, in American beef. Most U.S. cattle spend their final months at concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), packed in pens where they fatten on grain before slaughter. The beef industry itself has become concentrated. More than 80 percent of slaughterhouses in this country are controlled by just four companies.

In comparison, the Huebners patronize small slaughterhouses in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. They sell their beef direct to customers, to local restaurants and to local grocery stores. Lucia is unabashed in her opinion that beef raised at Beechtree Farm is tastier, healthier and more humane.

"When you get a hamburger from McDonald's, you can have as many as 1,000 different cows in one hamburger," she says. "When you get a hamburger from us, it's from one cow. That's it. And it's really, really delicious by the way."

A few miles down the road, at Double Brook Farm, Jon and Robin McConaughy also raise grass-fed beef—along with pigs, sheep, turkeys and chickens. They purchased the land in 2003 and bought their first cow in 2005. The couple says that reading dozens of books and articles about the American food system—prominent among them Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*—convinced them they wanted a farm and restaurant that could provide their neighbors with food that is as healthy, sustainable and humanely raised as possible.

"People in New Jersey are very savvy," Robin says. "They want local grass-fed beef, they want it fresh, they want a real butcher and they want to be able to get it from somebody they know."

### THE PROBLEM OF A BOTTLENECK

Business is brisk for the Huebners. Lucia says she can sell as much grass-fed beef as their farm has room to raise.

Jeff Bringhurst of Bringhurst Meats, a small slaughterhouse in Berlin, New Jersey, is also prospering. "'Locally grown,' is the buzzword right now," he says. Business is up—his shop now processes 30 cows a week. That's as much as it can handle.

As demand for local beef increases, however, a slaughterhouse shortage threatens to hold back livestock farmers throughout the region. Local meat-processing infrastructure in the Northeast, after declining for years, is now struggling to keep up. Currently, the Huebners must transport their cattle more than an hour to the nearest USDA-inspected meat processing facility, and they're among the lucky ones who can get regular appointments. In order to get a slaughterhouse date, farmers in other parts of the Northeast report having to make reservations prophetically—that is, before their animals are even born.

"The butchers are going to soon be overwhelmed," Huebner says. "So we need to rebuild our infrastructure."

Jon McConaughy points to another problem in the industry: Farmers have no control over what happens to their animals once they arrive at a slaughterhouse.

"Once you bring your cattle to the facility, there is no way to confirm that A) the cows you raised were treated humanely in the slaughter process and B) the meat you are getting back is actually yours," he wrote in a 2009 letter to U.S. regulators. "Small farmers routinely tell stories about getting more hearts and livers back from the slaughterhouse than animals sent."

### THE TRAVELING BUTCHER

In Central Jersey, the Huebners and the McConaughys are not waiting for someone else to solve the problem. They're leading the charge to create a USDA-approved slaughterhouse on wheels, the first in the state. If they're successful, the "Traveling Butcher" will travel to farms within a 50-mile radius of Hopewell. Animals won't have to



Jon McConaughy of Double Brook Farm is one a cadre of New Jersey farmers seeking a more humane alternative to traditional large-scale slaughterhouses.

journey much farther than the fields in which they lived their lives, and farmers will be able to oversee the slaughter process. At peak capacity, the Traveling Butcher could process 20 cows in a day, and it will be set up for lambs, pigs and poultry as well.

"It is much more humane to be able to have a farmer lead his own animal into the killbox, and then they're slaughtered," says Robin McConaughy. "There's no moment of fear." In addition to a better experience for the animal, it's also a better experience for the eater, she says. She points to scientific research that shows meat from animals stressed before they're slaughtered just doesn't taste as good.

In an average week, the Traveling Butcher would spend one day processing animals at Double Brook Farm, in Hopewell Township, and three days traveling to other farms in the community. The rig, a large trailer on wheels pulled by a truck, would employ two professional butchers. The cost to farmers hiring the Traveling Butcher would be equal to a traditional slaughterhouse. Jon McConaughy expects demand for the service will be strong.

"I think there's probably a lot of farmers that don't produce the number of animals they want, or any at all, because they don't have an outlet," he says. "People we have talked to are excited

about the prospect of not having to go to the slaughterhouse.”

The project won't be cheap, and it hasn't been easy. The estimated cost to get the mobile slaughterhouse operational is as high as one million dollars. Environmental regulations still stand in the way.

The project is being funded entirely by the McConaughys—Jon works on Wall Street as a managing director for the investment bank Credit Suisse. He has a vision to create a farm and restaurant that is locally sourced and highly sustainable in terms of energy and agricultural inputs—and he apparently has the financial clout to make it happen. He has five farmers working for him, and in April 2009 he hired Lucia Huebner specifically for the task of ushering the mobile slaughterhouse through a daunting regulatory process.

### OBSTACLES

Federal regulations require that all meat sold in the country come from a USDA-inspected slaughterhouse. For the past year-and-a-half, Huebner has been working to develop intricately detailed operating procedures to ensure the Traveling Butcher meets federal code. Just as challenging has been meeting New Jersey's strict—some say strictest in the nation—environmental rules.

The biggest hang-up for the Traveling Butcher is waste disposal. When a cow is butchered, about 200 pounds of bone, paunch and

In 1906, a young man in Princeton, New Jersey, named Upton Sinclair wrote a book that forever changed the American food system. Sinclair's book, *The Jungle*, described in gruesome detail the stomach-turning abuses of the Chicago meat-packing industry. The public uproar which followed led to the creation of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the first federal meat inspections.

Lucia Huebner thinks it's an interesting coincidence: When she first moved to New Jersey decades ago, she rented the very same cottage on Province Line Road in which Sinclair penned *The Jungle*.

organ are unusable, and there's wastewater to get rid of as well. In Washington State, where mobile slaughterhouses are already operational, butchers are allowed to compost slaughter waste in a bed of woodchips, and wastewater can be released directly onto the ground. An animal composting gone bad could lead to odor problems or groundwater contamination, however, and under New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) rules the process is much more regulated.

“Right now, what we have to do is put the slaughter waste into garbage bags and take it to the landfill, or have a renderer come and take it away,” Huebner says. “The water they consider industrial waste. We put that into a holding tank and have somebody come pick it up.” It's considerably more expensive to dispose of waste this way, and, in Huebner's opinion, a waste of perfectly good organic matter that should stay on the farm.

“It's nutrient-rich material,” she says. “It should be an asset, not a liability.” In Huebner's view, on-farm composting of slaughter waste completes a cycle of sustainability.

Jean Bonhotal, associate director of the Cornell Waste Management Institute at Cornell University, studies animal carcass composting. She agrees that the process is environmentally sound, provided it's done correctly and with enough space. “When we compost carcasses, we reach temperatures of 120 to 150 degrees,” Bonhotal says. “We're basically pasteurizing that pile.”

**“I'm totally opposed to the way animals are raised in factories,” says Lucia Huebner of Beechtree Farm in Hopewell.**





The Traveling Butcher is looking to hire two professional butchers to operate the mobile slaughterhouse. Jon McConaughy says he wants butchers who care about the humane treatment of animals, enjoy interacting with farmers, and can work with multiple species of livestock. A commercial driver's license would be a plus. Interested candidates can e-mail [travelingbutcher@gmail.com](mailto:travelingbutcher@gmail.com).

**McConaughy hopes to have the Traveling Butcher, a USDA slaughterhouse on wheels, operational by Summer 2011.**

For now, Huebner and the McConaughys continue to look for a waste disposal solution that makes sense economically and environmentally—and meets New

Jersey regulations. They are in discussions with both the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) and the New Jersey DEP. One option that appears promising is the use of an “in-vessel composter,” a special drum in which slaughter waste could be pretreated before it’s spread over the ground. The issue is complicated because the rules that govern waste originating at Double Brook Farm—where the Traveling Butcher will be based—are different than the rules for waste transported from other farms.

Monique Purcell, a director at the NJDA, says waste disposal regulations on the books now were designed with large slaughterhouses in mind, so everyone’s still trying to figure out how to handle the Traveling Butcher’s proposal. There may be an opportunity to craft new regulations specific to smaller slaughterhouses or to treat the Traveling Butcher as a research and demonstration project that would be closely

monitored. Overall, she’s highly supportive of the concept.

“We want to work with the farmer, and work with the DEP, to make sure that whatever we do, we do it in a responsible way,” she says. “We hope to be able to come up with a solution. Smaller on-farm slaughter units make a lot of sense.”

#### CHANGING THE SYSTEM

The McConaughys’ goal is for the Traveling Butcher to be operational by Summer 2011, the same time they plan to open their new restaurant in Hopewell. Among other local fare, the restaurant aims to serve locally raised, locally slaughtered grass-fed beef.

For Huebner, planning the nitty-gritty details of a slaughter operation—from blood to brains—is all part of a day’s work. Headlines about animal abuse and worker abuse in the country’s largest slaughterhouses motivate her. She sees the Traveling Butcher as part of the solution.

“Some people don’t want to know,” she says. “That’s the reaction I find most disturbing. It’s what you call a sin of omission. I think it’s important for people to become aware of how their food is processed. Mobile slaughter trailers are a really, really good idea.”