

The Ethical Case For Pink Slime

Written by Kyle Hill

Thursday, 18 October 2012 00:00

You walk up to the counter at a local fast food restaurant. Throwing a passing glance towards the area in back where the food is prepared, you order a cheeseburger. You sit down with your sugar-saturated soda and unwrap the yellow and red paper from the burger.

By now everyone has heard of the so-called “pink slime” added to burgers of just this type. You wonder what percentage of your burger has been extruded from a slender pipe. Taking a deep breath, you bite into it and...nothing happens. Nothing tastes weird; you don't have mush in your mouth or keel over. The burger is “same as is ever was.” And that's the point.

There are already [economic](#) , [human health](#) , and possible [environmental reasons](#) to continue using “lean finely textured beef” (LFTB) or “pink slime.” But as these arguments allude to, I think there is an ethical one as well.

There have been literally thousands of stories on LFTB this year, commenting on how a psychological “[ick factor](#)” generated the intense reaction from the public, exploring if LFTB is lurking in your child's [school lunch](#) , and examining how the term went viral with help from [social media](#) .

What has stood out for me is the underlying ethical argument in support of LFTB use. Yes, it looks gross, but this knee-jerk reaction conflicts with an evolving concern for non-human animal well-being. As our moral zeitgeist marches onward, if we aren't going to change the way we process meat in this country, using LFTB eliminates a great amount of animal suffering.

What LFTB Is and Is Not

When you process an animal for meat, you first cut off the largest chunks. But because only a portion of the animal is fit for consumption, there is a lot left over (bones, organs, etc.), including the trimmings. The trimmings consist largely of fat that has small bits of meat still on it. Contrary to much “pink slime” propaganda, these trimmings are *not* the result of “floor sweeping.” Bones and skin and internal organs make up the unusable portion of each animal that is disposed of in landfills or incinerated. The trimmings that yield LFTB are all processed on sanitized food-grade conveyor belts and cutting tables.

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Companies knew that it would be cost-prohibitive to hire workers or build machines to go through all the trimmings and salvage the tiny bits of leftover meat, so the trimmings used to be tossed out altogether. In the 1980s, a process was developed to recover all this lost meat. Trimmings are put in a giant centrifuge, heated slightly, and spun. Like a washing machine's spin cycle that spins off water, the fat is spun off from the meat. What is left over is of a gooey pink consistency, hence the term "pink slime." The recovered meat is then put through a thin tube and treated with ammonia gas. The gas reacts with the water in the meat to form ammonium hydroxide, reducing acidity and killing pathogens.

I wonder how negatively people would feel towards LFTB if the recovered meat were manually removed (keeping a "meaty" texture), as the "slimy" consistency is the result of the separation process, not some kind of grotesque cow-squeezing.

Much has been made about treating LFTB with ammonia, but this is a red herring. Numerous other foods we ingest have [higher ammonia content](#) and ammonia is used to sterilize literally [hundreds](#) of food types. As science journalist Deborah Blum [puts it](#), "...if we're going to worry about chemical processing, beef products need to stand in line."

At least according to the meat industry, LFTB is nutritionally equivalent to the ground beef that we are all familiar with. If neither nutrition nor chemical treatment is really a problem, the "ick factor" must be incredibly strong to warrant such a reaction from the public. In my mind, if people knew just how many animals we were saving, perhaps our revulsion would cease (or at least diminish).

An Ethical Case

If we have to slaughter animals for food, one hopes that it is in a humane way. The continued use of LFTB doesn't just pose negligible health risks; it saves a lot of cattle. In a [recent interview](#), famed animal behaviorist Temple Grandin makes the ethical case:

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If we stopped using [LFTB], we're throwing away a lot of cattle. Let's say you had a great, big, huge plant and they slaughter 5,000 cattle a day, and if we don't use this beef protein...let's say we stopped using that product. That would be the equivalent, at this great, big plant, that we just take one entire truckload of their cattle, we just take them to the dump and shoot them and throw them in the dump. We'd take a truckload each day from each big plant and just throw them in the garbage. That would be about 42 head of steers, and we're going to just throw them away. That's really unethical, that's food waste.

Marion Nestle, [writing in *The Atlantic*](#), echoes Grandin's point:

LFTB recovers 10 to 12 pounds of edible lean beef from every animal and is said to save another 1.5 million animals from slaughter.

Lastly, BeefisBeef.com, a website aiming to correct the misconceptions about LFTB, adds to the ethical argument:

If LFTB were not produced, 850,000,000 lbs of lean beef a year would need to be generated from some other source to meet consumer demand. It would be like throwing away 5,700 cattle a day. In a world where population is increasing; red meat consumption is rising; and available supply is declining, it would seem that getting all the lean meat from every animal is the absolute necessary and responsible thing to do.

Putting aside the fears of ammonia and the "ick factor" of gooey pink animal protein, the practice saves many animals. It seems to be the best of a bad situation. Ideally, we wouldn't have any animals suffer, but since the insatiable appetite for animal flesh persists, we might as well use everything we can get from their collective demise. An argument could be made, and indeed I will make it, that the animals we save by using LFTB reduces the fear of "pink slime" to a shameful knee-jerk reaction to unfamiliar textures and colors.

If we use more ammonia on many other food products, if there are [no health risks](#), if the consistency and color produced is simply a byproduct of being in a centrifuge, and if using it saves millions of animals, the conclusion to continue using LFTB is a clear one.

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“The product is meat, period.”



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USDA inspection of beef grinding operation by The USDA

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