

SLAUGHTERHOUSE 505

FOOD FOR IDIOTS: MEAT COMES FROM CUTE, FUZZY ANIMALS

By: [Zane Fischer](#) 11/11/2009

Actress Natalie Portman recently declared on her blog on [Huffington Post](#) that Jonathan Safran Foer's new book, **Eating Animals**, has turned her from a 20-year vegetarian into a vegan activist. She maybe was too busy being a child actress to have read Upton Sinclair's **The Jungle** in middle school like the rest of the English-speaking planet. Regardless, she's got a fresh and zealous righteousness regarding the meat industry.



Talus Wind Ranch's Southdown lambs are not the sharpest sheep on the range, according to Tim Willms, but they taste better than broccoli.

A lot of people, including non-celebrities, are up in arms, having apparently realized, through Safran Foer's book, the tired old fact that eating factory-farmed meat is the nastiest possible activity. Their cult-like zeal likely comes from Safran Foer's prose, executed with a butcher's precision, and his intimate, revelatory storytelling style (he has published only fiction before now). Safran Foer's research is impeccable, far more so than the cognitive skills of the bulk of his readers, who seem to have skimmed over his admiration for small, alternative meat production operations that aid the environment and the working-class economy rather than brutally extracting from both.

Though Safran Foer himself is a committed vegetarian, he's too well-informed to paint all meat production and eating with the same brush. His newly devoted fans are fanatical in their disgust of factory farming, but they're forgetting the need--assuming they want to see real change--to be equally passionate about supporting local and regional agricultural systems that respectfully raise animals as part of a holistic methodology.

Typical of a media sensation book, the parts of *Eating Animals* that garner the most attention are the weakest. Safran Foer asks whether people would submit their pet dogs to branding, castration and slaughter and Americans react as though it's an idea that never occurred to them before. But it's purely a cultural conceit. Many peoples of the world are perfectly happy to eat dogs or horses or guinea pigs or whatever they are lucky enough to get their hands on. The argument is a red herring that plays on the gooey emotions of the American audience, but has little bearing on the practice or industry of eating meat.

By and large, *Eating Animals* is a necessary contemporary update of *The Jungle*, and the more people who read it and find themselves outraged, the better. But instead of railing against meat, the better action is to rail in favor of responsible meat.

Take Tim Willms' [Talus Wind Ranch](#), for example. Willms raises lambs, rabbits and heritage turkeys at his Galisteo ranch. The operation is the antithesis of factory farming. When Willms was dissatisfied with the options available for processing his animals, he bought a

slaughterhouse in Mountainair and went into business for himself. He makes it possible for dozens of small, regional ranchers to earn a decent price from their animals—free from the bullying of price-fixing bulk buyers from out of state.

Willms also has purchased the Galisteo Village Store and is in the process of transforming it into a locals' social club and community kitchen, as well as an outlet for Galisteo area food products of all types. Among the ideas that he uses Talus Wind as a platform to champion is "nose-to-tail eating," reminding Americans of how to use (and thereby respect) the whole animal—an eating and resource premise that we've all but lost in just a few generations of processed food.

Thus far, Talus Wind—with products served in several area restaurants—has made great strides with chefs willing to use "less popular" cuts, either for forgotten classics or in the invention of new creations. And for those chefs complaining that the cuts they want aren't available locally—and you know who you are—Willms extends an open invitation to visit the slaughterhouse and demonstrate to his experienced butchers exactly what you want.

Unless it's Natalie Portman.