

The era of the ethical meat startup is upon us

It's becoming more common to see startups espousing the benefits of regenerative agriculture to meat-lovers with morals. One company, The Ethical Butcher, recently suggested we ditch Veganuary and take up 'Regenuary' instead. But can animal agriculture ever be ethical?

Temps de lecture : minute

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To herald the start of January, and a new round of resolutions made for ourselves and our planet, [The Ethical Butcher](#) recently announced its Regenuary campaign across social media. The premise? 'Regenuary, whether you're vegan or omnivore, is all about eating foods that are local, seasonal and farmed using regenerative methods, now that really could save the world.' The optics? 'Veganuary' with a slash through it, replaced with 'Regenuary', and a lot of incendiary stereotypes about plant-based eating.

'Simply swapping out beef and pork for nuts and avocado is worse for the environment than simply choosing to eat well raised animals.' reads the post. 'Unfortunately for vegans, the avocado is one of history's most unethical fruits.'



Full disclosure: I don't really eat much by way of nuts and avocado, but I am a vegan. I didn't love the post - or the scores of meat-eaters flocking to it to vocalise long-held gripes with modern veganism.

But though I personally struggle to see unnecessary killing as an ethical position, I accept that's far from a universal view. People - around 95% of them, in fact - eat meat. I've been at the tail end of Ethical Butcher targeted advertising for a while now, and have found it intriguing rather than infuriating. Clearly, awareness of the perils of factory farming is

growing, and businesses are cropping up to meet consumer demand for alternatives.

The Ethical Butcher is just one such business. Another, Piper's Farm, farms 'in harmony with nature, using regenerative farming techniques to nurture our countryside'. Primal Meats produces meats that are 'more than just sustainable [;] they're a vote towards a better future', and Farmisons states 'the majority (if not all) of the small, local farms we work with are carbon neutral/negative.' Field and Flower supports 'British farmers and fishermen who champion animal welfare and sustainability'.

Many people can't or won't give up meat - so, in the short term, perhaps it is best they buy grass-fed, free-range produce that hasn't spent its life being plied with antibiotics. From both a moral and environmental standpoint, I get how it may be better for individuals in the UK to buy from transparent and regenerative supply chains than factory farms.

But only in the short term.

Environmentally-friendly meat?

By 2050, there'll be 10B people to feed in the world. Already, we have 800M people living in nutritional deficit, due to various sociopolitical factors - but certainly not helped by the fact that nearly half of the food we harvest goes towards feeding the 50B+ animals that are killed annually. In terms of land and resource use, animal agriculture is an incredibly inefficient means of feeding the world; it will always make more sense to go grain -> human than grain -> cow/pig/chicken -> human.

Sure, humans can't eat grass, but grass-feeding beef - a key tenet of the 'ethical meat' philosophy - was recently analysed in an Oxford University study entitled 'Grazed and Confused?'. 'A world where grazing ruminant systems were to supply all our meat demand - would be [...] problematic',

write the authors. 'This future requires a massive expansion of grazing land, which would inevitably occur at the expense of forest cover, and a massive increase in methane emissions.'



According to coauthor Tara Garnett, "Grazing livestock are net contributors to the climate problem, as are all livestock."

When it comes to the climate crisis, we've already run out of time. However idealistic the transition to veganism and lab-grown meat might seem, the science points to it being our best and only bet. Vegan activist [Earthling Ed](#) has published [a rebuttal](#) to the Ethical Butcher's Regenuary post, disputing the suggestion that vegan diets can be eco-unfriendly because 'consumers try to fill the [protein and fat] gaps with substitutes which are heavily imported', since transportation only constitutes a tiny percentage of overall food emissions.

'A peer-reviewed and published meta-analysis of 1,530 studies showed that a plant-based diet is the most sustainable diet, with even the lowest impact beef being responsible for six times more greenhouse gases and 36 times more land compared to plant protein such as peas', he added, referring to 'Reducing food's environmental impact through producers and consumers', published in *Science*.

Around a year ago, The Ethical Butcher ran a crowdfunding campaign on Crowdcube, where the questions of potential investors were answered and a vision for the future was revealed. In response to persistent questioning on the scalability of the business model and the viability of carbon neutral/negative production, the team made comments to the tune of:

"Our intention is to work towards carbon negative beef and lamb production. We are not claiming that from the outset we will be supplying this," and:

"We are aware that actually getting to the point of being even carbon neutral is a difficult one and will not be possible at the beginning due to many other factors such as shipping, packaging materials etc but it's what we are working towards, it's our aim for the future and we believe it is not only possible but worth striving for."

When I asked Glen Burrows, cofounder of the Ethical Butcher, about his plan for the future of his company and the adoption of its model on a societal level, he said:

“This is something I need to get out: we are a UK business. We’re not trying to solve world hunger. We are doing methods of farming within the shores of the UK that work for here, and are selling our produce within these shores. So everything I want to talk about will be in relation to land usage and how the land reacts here - because we’re not doing anything anywhere else, so it’s almost a null argument to talk about any other country.”

“Within the UK, if we reduce the amount of grain we feed to animals, we reduce the amount of land we need to produce meat. We don’t feed grazing animals grain - they don’t need it. On the land usage front, people need to eat less meat, better quality meat, and more of the animal. Those three things will provide an answer to your question. Can we support the taste for meat in the UK with what we’re doing? Absolutely, if we follow those three principles.”

Glen continues on to talk about soil depletion due to monocropping within arable farming, and the role livestock can play in combating this and improving levels of soil carbon.

“If we start integrating animals into our arable systems, this really is scalable to whatever level we need it to be.”



Based on the evidence, I'd say regenerative animal agriculture is an alright shout for now, and that these 'ethical meat startups' are hardly the major villains here. They too take issue with giants like Cargill, which has been labeled 'the worst company in the world', and are rectifying *some* of the wrongs of industrial animal rearing.

But they're also not the heroes - and they do the public a disservice by suggesting that they are. Regenerative agriculture might enrich soil and increase biodiversity on a local level, but anyone participating in the global animal agriculture system does more environmental harm than good.

Ethical meat?

Labelling your organisation 'the ethical' anything is brave; you set the highest standards for yourself, and will always invite scrutiny at best and

accusations of deliberate misinformation at worst. And what about ethics in a more basic sense – animal welfare in the here and now, rather than the moral implications of climate action or lack thereof?

The process of slaughter is a particularly contentious aspect of global meat production. It is physically and mentally taxing for those doing the slaughtering, and not a traditionally desirable role; in the UK last year, circa 69% of the workforce were reported to be migrant workers from EU member states.

In 2016, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that ‘British farm animals are subjected to needless pain and distress six times a day on average as they are slaughtered’, and in 2018 it noted that ‘18 workers [in British slaughterhouses] lost fingers, parts of fingers or limbs and over 100 suffered serious injuries including damage to eyesight, and crush injuries to head or torso in just one year, between 2016-17.’

As things stand, there is little transparency about what happens behind closed doors at abattoirs - even for farmers, who are in control at every other stage of the process. Unfortunately, this extends to the leadership team at The Ethical Butcher, and will - I expect - be the case at other startups promising ‘ethical meat’.

“It’s the one part of the business that I freely admit we do not have much control over - or enough control over,” says Glen.

“I’m not happy enough in the answer that I will give you, which means it’s something I will continue working on.”

“At the moment, we are sourcing from farms which are all over the

country, and all of the farmers who we're using operate at incredibly high standards of welfare for both the animals and the land. We have taken the position at this stage to say to the farmers: "We trust you to do what's best for the end of life of the animals, and we will work with whichever abattoirs you have decided offer the highest level of welfare."



"This varies dramatically from small, almost cottage-industry, abattoirs [...] on the other hand we also work with some farmers who use a very large abattoir up in Shropshire called Pickstock, which is the opposite end of the scale. It's a large processing facility, but it has been designed on the principles of someone called Temple Grandin [...] who came up with a lot of the processes behind what is now called 'humane slaughter'".

"In the future, what I would like, which has only just become legally available, is to have a mobile unit that visits the farms and does the kill in field [...] Some of the farmers who've trialled this have said this is

absolutely the most humane way.”

Cleverly-marketed meat?

I enjoyed my brief conversation with Glen - an ex-vegetarian who has clearly thought a lot about animal rights, and who finds soil as fascinating as I do. But my scepticism about the limited scope of regenerative animal agriculture remains, as does my feeling that unnecessary suffering is inherent to meat, egg and dairy production.

The Ethical Butcher has gained around 10K Instagram followers since its provocative ‘Veganuary vs. Reganuary’ Instagram post – and has set its sights on rivalling Veganuary’s one million signups. The brand touts itself as ‘changing how animals and humans coexist in the food chain and how we view our place in nature’. It’s spearheading ‘the craft meat revolution’, and preaching that ‘eating meat doesn’t cost the earth.’ ‘We believe all farming should be like this’, the website copy continues.

Such is the nature of startup speak nowadays that every new business seems to describe itself as ‘disruptive’, ‘revolutionary’ and so on. But the stakes (steaks..?) are higher for ethical meat startups, who risk misinforming and therefore following in the footsteps of decades of agribusiness propaganda. This is not a coherent sustainable vision for the future, and should not be marketed as such.

The Ethical Butcher, and other startups capitalising on the current taste for regenerative meat production, would do well to reassess the message and vision they’re preaching. The post, and the hoards of meat-eaters sharing it, carried a hint of vindication – a suggestion that veganism was ‘cancelled’ and our future would revolve around eating meat, mindfully.

It was disappointing to see a supposedly environmentally-friendly company relying on the tropes and arguments that mainstream animal

agriculture has always relied on. So much so that I wasn't surprised when Dunbia, one of Europe's largest beef and lamb processors, retweeted the Regenuary call to action. The Ethical Butcher and other 'new meat' startups reject mainstream animal agriculture, but they might just be helping it to survive.

In reality, regenerative animal agriculture is the fad, not plant-based eating. Without honesty, humility, and adaptability, ethical meat startups - like diesel cars and carbon offsetting - will quickly become the next dismantled trend in eco progress.

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