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THE FOOD ISSUE

Kosher Wars

By SAMANTHA M. SHAPIRO

ONE SUNNY DAY in late August, Andy Kastner made the short drive from his apartment in Riverdale, in the Bronx, to Yonkers First Live Poultry Market, a narrow cinder-block shop that sells live chickens, pigeons, quail and rabbits stacked in ancient-looking metal cages. At Yonkers First, workers usually slaughter and butcher the animals for customers, but Kastner was there because he wanted to kill his own chickens.

Kastner, who is 28 and has curly hair, big brown eyes, stick-straight posture and a calm, thoughtful demeanor, had recently returned from his summer job leading a community-service trip for Jewish teenagers to a Navajo reservation, and he was about to begin his third year at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a small, Orthodox rabbinical school. He parked his green Subaru by an auto-body shop across from the poultry market, and from the backseat he grabbed a tote bag holding his slaughtering knife, his butcher's jacket and a red leather book in Hebrew.

Kastner spent the previous year studying how to slaughter animals according to Jewish law. Kosher dietary laws, which religious Jews observe, prohibit eating certain animals, and the ones that are permitted must be killed and butchered in very specific ways. There was a time when learning the practice of slaughter, or shechita, was part of standard training for rabbis, but in an era when most animals are killed and butchered on assembly lines, it has disappeared from the curriculum of most rabbinical schools.

Kastner's yeshiva didn't teach shechita, so he asked the head of the school for help finding a teacher. Then he cold-called shochtim, or ritual slaughterers, in the New York area looking for information on where to get the special knife required for kosher slaughter. ("It turned out they were made in some guy's basement in Brooklyn," Kastner told me.) Now that Kastner has completed his training, he occasionally comes by Yonkers First to practice. Shechita requires one quick, smooth cut to the throat, which must sever the trachea and esophagus but not hit the spinal cord. The amount of force needed for the cut depends on the breed of animal, and the only way to learn is to practice. Kastner and his wife serve the chickens that he cuts correctly for Shabbat dinner, and he gives the occasional mistake to his doorman.

Ten years ago, learning how to slit animals' throats by hand was simply not a compelling choice for young rabbis of the clean-shaven, earnest sort like Kastner. But the politicization of food issues and the popularization of epicurean and artisanal eating has made learning Jewish food traditions relevant for a new generation. Kastner grew up in the Reform movement, which 120 years ago formally disavowed kashrut, the kosher dietary laws, as an anachronistic impediment to "modern spiritual elevation" — though Reform leaders later softened their position, decreeing that kashrut was a matter of personal choice. But for

Kastner, Jewish ritual slaughter actually seems a bit revolutionary. He says he thinks that contemporary disconnection from our food sources is the cause of numerous environmental and social ills, like the national obesity epidemic. He wanted to be a shochet to help people make more healthful food choices and reconnect to the source of their food, and to encourage investment in local agriculture. He says the rules around kosher food — like the requirement that meat be slaughtered by a pious person with a certain intention and the requirement to say a blessing over every food acknowledging its source (land, tree, grain, other) — encourage mindful eating and discourage overconsumption of resources.

Kastner is part of a nascent Jewish food movement that draws upon the vast body of Jewish traditions related to agriculture and farming; Judaism, for all its scholarly abstraction, is a land-based religion. The movement emphasizes the natural intersections between the sustainable-food movement and kashrut: a shared concern for purity and an awareness of the process food goes through before it reaches the table. “The core of kashrut is the idea of limiting oneself, that not everything that we can consume should be consumed,” Kastner said. “I wouldn’t buy a ham sandwich, and I would also refrain from buying an exotic mangosteen imported from China, which wastes fossil fuels and is grown with pesticides.” He told me he studied shechita because he wants to “create food systems outside the industrial model.” He has been trying to set up a grass-fed-kosher-meat co-op in his neighborhood; he says he hopes to travel to a local farm and shecht the animals himself.

The proprietor of Yonkers First, Vincent Siani, was happy to see Kastner. Siani has a modified pompadour with a white streak and was wearing two gold chains with cross pendants, a pinkie ring and a diamond-stud earring. Siani’s father ran the store before he took it over, and Siani told me he remembered when a rabbi hung out at the shop a few days a week to serve the neighborhood’s Jewish customers. These days, his customers are mostly from the surrounding Hispanic neighborhood, although Muslims sometimes ask to slaughter their own animals for holidays, or they have Siani do it. “They ask me to say, ‘Bismillah,’ and, ‘Allah hu Akbar,’ when I make the cut,” Siani said. He shrugged. “It don’t cost me nothing.”

Kastner went to the back of the store and peered inside a cage full of white chickens. He opened the door a bit, tentatively reached around inside and then closed it. “This is the hard part,” Kastner sighed. “They know what’s up. You can feel their feathers plump when you reach in. They all hide in the corner.” Siani came back to chat about the chickens available that day, which breeds were better for soup, which would be more tender. Siani opened a cage of small birds that he pronounced superior, unceremoniously pulled two out and handed them, squawking, to Kastner.

Kastner took the chickens to the small room for slaughter and placed them in the deep sink. He took a knotted plastic bag filled with dirt out of his pocket and sprinkled the dirt into two plastic cones where the chickens would be placed after they were killed, to drain the blood. The Torah says the blood of an animal contains its “life” and should not be eaten, and when some animals are killed, their blood is supposed to be buried with a blessing. That’s why Kastner lined the cone with dirt. He unsheathed his knife and ran the blade across his fingernail to check for nicks, which would render the animal unkosher. He picked up one bird, held both its wings in one hand, and tipped it back so its head hung upside down against the back of his arm. Kastner ran a finger across the chicken’s neck to elongate it, whispered a blessing and made his cut.

FOR MOST OF Jewish history, kashrut was a home- and community-based ritual. There were no prepared

kosher foods and few restaurants. As recently as the 1950s, my father would sometimes travel with his town's rabbi and kosher butcher to a farm, where the rabbi would slaughter and skin an animal. They would bring it to a local kosher butcher, who would remove the veins and tributaries and certain fats; later, the women who bought the meat would ritually soak and salt it on boards in their kitchens to drain the blood.

But in the age of industrial food production, kosher food has become a \$12.5-billion-a-year business, monitored by an elaborate multimillion-dollar kosher-certification system. The Orthodox Union, or O.U., the largest kosher-certification agency in the country, charges companies a fee (which ranges, depending on the size of the company, from \$4,000 to \$10,000) to supervise their ingredients and equipment and place a small symbol on their food packages indicating the food is kosher. Last year, the O.U. certified more than half a million products, mostly the preservatives, colorings and additives found in most processed food, generating millions of dollars in profit.

Perhaps surprisingly, more than 70 percent of kosher-food consumers in the United States are not observant Jews; they choose kosher products because they view them as safer or rely on the strict ingredient labeling for their food allergies or other religious concerns. According to a report released earlier this year by the Mintel International Group, a London-based market-research company, the observant Jewish population alone is not large enough to support the market for food bought specifically because it is kosher. (This finding is borne out by the dozens of candy and cookie companies that request kosher certification each year for special Christmas- and Easter-themed products.)

Kosher meat represents a small part of the overall kosher industry and a tiny fraction of the American meat industry, but it has followed the larger meat-industry trend toward consolidating local slaughterhouses and butcher shops into megaplants, where all the meat is processed on site and shipped out precut. Some kosher meat distributors arrange to bring their own slaughterer and processors to a nonkosher processing plant one day out of the month, and others operate their own facility.

[Agriprocessors](#), the largest independent facility, was started by Aaron Rubashkin, who is part of a prominent family in the Chabad Lubavitch movement. Rubashkin ran a kosher butcher shop in Brooklyn for many years, and in 1987 he decided to buy a defunct meat-processing plant in Postville, Iowa. Agriprocessors hired low-wage, nonunionized workers, often illegal immigrants, and they churned out huge volumes of both regular kosher and glatt-kosher meat (which hews to a more strict standard than regular kosher) as well as nonkosher meat, which accounts for the majority of their output. Agriprocessors came to dominate the market, providing about 60 percent of the kosher beef and 40 percent of the kosher poultry nationwide. In many parts of the country, Agriprocessors became the only option for glatt-kosher beef. While Agriprocessors grew, the infrastructure of small-scale kosher meat production — local slaughterhouses and butchers, and Jews who knew how to kasher meat in their own sinks — was largely disappearing. Jews no longer know that their meat is kosher because they know the person who killed it but because of the symbol that appears on the shrink-wrap at the grocery store.

In 2004, in response to tips about excessive use of cattle prods at the Postville plant, [PETA](#), the animal rights group, sent undercover operatives into Agriprocessors, and they returned with especially gruesome footage of workers ripping out the tracheae of live cows after their throats had been cut. The PETA video was only the beginning of a long run of bad press for Agriprocessors. In 2006, *The Forward*, a national Jewish newspaper, published a long exposé claiming bad labor practices at the plant as well as health and

safety violations. That May, Agriprocessors was the target of what was then the largest single-site [immigration](#) raid in U.S. history; 389 employees were arrested, and Iowa's attorney general filed criminal charges against Agriprocessors and Aaron Rubashkin for more than 9,000 counts of child-labor violations.

The allegations against Agriprocessors galvanized a small but thriving Jewish environmental movement and took its concerns to a much wider audience. In some American Jewish households, the raid on Agriprocessors started a deep conversation about the very meaning of kosher: is it simply about cutting an animal's neck and butchering it in a specific way? Or is the ritual also meant to minimize an animal's pain or to bring sanctity to its death? Does it matter how the animal was treated when it was alive? How about the workers who processed it? Is reverence for life possible in a factory-farming setting?

Jewish religious texts contain many laws about the treatment of workers and animals. For example, the Torah repeats some variation on the injunction "Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt" seven times. It requires animals to rest on Shabbat and prohibits farmers from making an animal carry too heavy a load. But in the Jewish legal system, rules about the treatment of workers and animals are not directly linked to kashrut. A cow that is mistreated does not become unkosher as it would if it had too many adhesions on its lung.

The idea of linking kosher food with other ethical issues is not new. In the 1970s, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein of New York urged Jews not to eat veal. In the late 1980s, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a leader of the Jewish Renewal movement, wrote that Jews should examine all the resources they consume, not just food, to determine if they were "kosher" in the broadest sense of the word. (Kosher means "fit" in Hebrew.) In 1990, Waskow convened a conference with rabbis from every denomination to introduce this idea, which he called eco-kashrut. Waskow suggested that perhaps nuclear power shouldn't be kosher. What about paper that's not made from postconsumer waste?

At the time, Waskow's proposals were considered marginal, and few Jews took steps to implement them. But since then, many of his ideas about food have become more mainstream. Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization, helps support several Jewish farms around the Northeast and convenes an annual food conference with classes on urban worm composting and biblical farming laws and, in one case, a live-animal-slaughter demonstration. And in the wake of the allegations against Agriprocessors, a number of American groups have set about trying to create a certification system for kosher food that would alert consumers to the conditions under which it was produced. In August, Morris Allen, a rabbi in Minnesota, released preliminary guidelines for an additional certification, which he calls Hekhsher Tzedek (literally, "justice certification"), a seal that Allen says he hopes will appear on kosher products that are also created under fair working conditions. In New York, Uri L'Tzedek, an Orthodox social-justice group, announced plans to introduce a certification system for kosher restaurants based on worker treatment this fall. A group of Los Angeles Orthodox rabbis plans a similar effort in a Jewish neighborhood there.

OVER THE LAST YEAR, several unlikely entrepreneurs have attempted to create an alternative kosher food economy based on the local systems of farmers' markets and food cooperatives that have evolved in many parts of the United States over the last decade.

I have a friend named Simon Feil, a 32-year-old actor and sushi instructor, who is completely obsessed with meat; he deep-fries it, bakes it, slow-cooks it in his rotisserie. Vegetables make rare and grudging

appearances at his dinner table; I once attended a Shabbat dinner where he served a challah into which he had embedded a footlong kosher hot dog before baking. In 2004, Feil saw the PETA videos from Agriprocessors, and he was shocked. Feil thought he knew a thing or two about kashrut; he grew up attending Orthodox day schools and yeshiva in Israel and later worked as a kosher supervisor for a Chinese restaurant. But until he saw the PETA videos, Feil had always assumed that if an animal was kosher, it wasn't mistreated at any stage of its life. "We always learned that kosher slaughter is more humane," Feil told me recently. "And we learned all these rules about not inflicting pain on animals. It sounds silly now, but it never occurred to me that you could violate those laws in a kosher establishment in any way." Feil no longer felt comfortable eating meat, and becoming a [vegetarian](#) was clearly not an option for him. So he set about creating an alternative that met his ideal of kosher, a process more arduous than he bargained for. His co-op, Kosher Conscience, distributed one round of Royal Palm heritage turkeys last Thanksgiving and has a second round of Broad-Breasted Whites, plus a flock of free-range chickens, in the works. A benefactor who learned of Feil's efforts just bought him a \$3,500 chicken-plucking machine.

Last year, Maya Shetreat-Klein, a 34-year-old pediatric neurologist who lives in Riverdale, decided she wanted to feed her family of five grass-fed meat, for health reasons and because, she said, kashrut should be about "elevating ordinary experiences." When she was still trying to find all the people and equipment she would need — a farmer, a certifying rabbi and humane restraints for kosher slaughter that she could use at the local nonkosher slaughterhouse — her efforts were mentioned in an opinion piece in *The Jewish Week*. It was just one sentence, but it struck a nerve. People started contacting her, offering assistance, financial and otherwise. "I felt a responsibility to provide the meat to a wider group, since there was so much interest," Shetreat-Klein told me. In August, her new co-op, Mitzvah Meat, slaughtered and processed 31 lambs and two grass-fed cows, all raised on farms in the Hudson Valley. Shetreat-Klein says she now hopes to make monthly deliveries of kosher meat.

The most fully developed of these grass-roots kosher-meat distributors is KOL Foods (for Kosher Organic-Raised Local), based in Silver Spring, Md., which sells grass-fed lamb and beef through synagogues in Maryland, New Jersey, Philadelphia, California and Washington. Devora Kimelman-Block, the founder of KOL Foods, had been running a community-supported agricultural co-op out of her synagogue for two years when, in the fall of 2006, she decided to try to start distributing meat. She had kept a vegetarian kosher kitchen for 16 years because she didn't want to support the factory-farming system and there were no local, pasture-raised kosher options. But she loved meat. ("It's just damn good," she told me, shaking her head.) It took her almost a year to coordinate the project, but finally, in July of last year, KOL Foods slaughtered three cows raised on a farm in Rocky Ridge, Md., at one of the nation's few remaining independent kosher slaughterhouses, in Baltimore. The cows were then butchered at a small shop in Silver Spring, yielding 400 pounds of kosher meat that Kimelman-Block sold in 50-pound boxes.

Kimelman-Block's marketing effort was pretty low-key: she sent e-mail messages to organic-food groups and to the listserv for her children's day school and her synagogue. But the response was huge: she sold \$11,000 worth of meat in less than a week. She soon had waiting lists in four Northeastern cities, as well as about 100 unsolicited e-mail messages from eager customers scattered around the country. A man from Cleveland drove to Maryland and bought more than 100 pounds of Kimelman-Block's meat. These days, she says, she sells as much as \$20,000 a month in kosher beef and lamb.

Some in the ethical-kashrut movement describe it as a return to the traditional values of kashrut: community-based supervision of the food supply, reverence for agriculture and animal husbandry and attention to detail. They see new small-scale meat companies like Kimelman-Block's as a welcome throwback to the food networks of the shtetl. Rabbi Allen's proposal for a new "justice certification," which has been embraced by the Conservative and Reform movements and by social-justice groups like Hazon, is laced with quotations from the Talmud and the Jewish legal codes about the treatment of workers. But some Orthodox rabbis say that labeling kosher foods or restaurants according to an additional set of standards would inappropriately redefine kashrut and that it grafts trendy values and ideas onto a practice whose real purpose is mysterious and unknowable.

Part of this debate has to do with denominational infighting. Some Orthodox Jews don't like the idea of Conservative Jews or even liberal Modern Orthodox Jews horning in on an area of Jewish life that has traditionally been the domain of the Orthodox alone. But some of the debate harks back to longstanding Jewish questions about the purpose of religious observance: Does God require adherence to his laws because they are just, or is following God's laws a good unto itself whether or not the laws serve a moral purpose? Should Jews keep kosher because it is an ethical practice, or should they keep kosher because it is what God wants? Last month, Agudath Israel, a lobbying organization that represents haredi, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, released a statement opposing Allen's proposals for a "justice certification." [Avi Shafran](#), a spokesman for Agudath Israel, told me that if kashrut is framed as simply an ethical practice, or as a practice with any specific function other than obeying God's law, it could set the stage for the practice to ultimately be discarded.

Over the years, Jewish scholars have suggested a variety of explanations for the kosher laws. The medieval commentator Maimonides said kashrut was a means of acquiring discipline. In the early 1900s, the first chief rabbi of [Palestine](#) under the British mandate, Avraham Yitzhak Kook, taught that the restrictions were a part of the Torah's effort to limit meat consumption in general. But even the most radical champions of ethical kashrut acknowledge that there is an aspect of the practice that is simply unknowable. "In some profound way, kashrut is not rational," Waskow told me. "That may even be part of it. The idea may be just to cause you to pause before you put food in your mouth. To stop and ask a question."

Samantha M. Shapiro is a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine.

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