

Ethical Food Choices Translate Into Better Business for Many Restaurants

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Many restaurant owners are finding that ethical food choices on the menu mean more customers at the table.

When a small bistro reopened recently in downtown Manchester, N.H., the owners promised that better quality ingredients will be on their menu.

Edward Aloise, who owns the Republic restaurant with wife and business partner Claudia Rippee, said they will buy beef, chicken, eggs, milk and cheese from local farmers and growers who do not use growth hormones or antibiotics.

Farm animals' welfare is part of the story, Aloise said. But it's not the only issue involved with ethical food choices.

"I'm not a zealot" about animal welfare, Aloise said in a March 11 interview. In fact, his wife is the member of the pair who is more concerned about the ethical treatment of other living creatures. Nonetheless, he sees the Republic restaurant as a way to make a personal and political statement about the food industry and consumers' rights. Simply put, he doesn't think eating beef and poultry raised on antibiotics and growth hormones is healthy, and he doesn't want them served in his kitchen.

Making such a statement can cost a little more to both owners and diners — but what's happening in Manchester could be part of a new trend, as more retailers and restaurant owners find that supporting ethical food choices translates into good business.

"There are so many reasons to get involved," said Gene Baur, president of Farm Sanctuary, the Watkins Glen, N.Y., non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing maltreated farm animals and exposing cruel practices.

His short list of these reasons includes stopping the pollution of the food supply with diseased animals, and ending the harm to the environment, not to mention abolishing inhumane treatment of the animals.

No question, people are concerned about farm animal welfare, and businesses are paying attention. According to Michael Prescott, spokesman for the U.S. Humane Society based in Washington, D.C., several studies show American consumers “care deeply about the treatment of animals.” Restaurants, including some large chains, are starting to buy “cage-free” eggs, although these purchases still represent only a fraction of their supply.

Also recently, Hellmann’s has announced it will convert to cage-free eggs for 100 percent of its mayonnaise production, he said.

Humane food labels are the “fastest growing sector” of the U.S. food industry, Baur said. But some manufacturer claims are overstated, while others are so deceiving they simply amount to a way for manufacturers to maximize profits.

“These animals are being raised in an inhumane way, despite the label,” Baur said, and most consumers have no idea about the terrible conditions these animals suffer.

But consumers can check to see if many retailers are cheating, said Kathi Brock, the American Humane Association’s director of strategic partnership.

When in doubt, consumers should ask “Who certifies you?” and demand to see a label. American Humane Certified, she said, is one of only two or three U.S. organizations that certify growers treat animals humanely and produce high-quality food. And they verify. The non-profit organization sends independent auditors to inspect farms annually, she said. The farm pays the \$1,800 cost for the one-day visit, but smaller farms and co-ops may be allowed to pool the fee.

Brock said she is seeing definite signs of progress from farmers committed to protecting farm animals.

“We wouldn’t be growing as fast as we have been,” she said, unless the food industry had started paying attention to studies people are making ethical food choices, and selecting products which are safe for the environment, good for farm animals and healthy for people.

Over the past two years, she said, American Humane Certified, based in Colorado, has extended its program and now covers “well over 600” farms and growers in the U.S. and Canada — affecting 60 million animals and 65 percent of all “cage-free” operations. The program is voluntary and by the time the farmers ask for certification, they are pretty sure they will pass muster, she said.

But cage-free still accounts for only about five percent of total U.S. egg production, Brock said. And of course, the “organic” label has been a bone of contention, she said, due to loopholes in the USDA rules.

Recent rule changes, however, will require food manufacturers to do more to protect animals before they stamp the “organic” label on products, Baur said. That’s a start, although these changes don’t go far enough to end cruel practices, he said.

“I’m cautiously optimistic,” Baur reflected, because Kathleen Merrigan, USDA deputy secretary, has called the rule changes a “down payment,” suggesting future reforms will come.

“The USDA’s in a tough spot,” said Baur. Historically, the agency’s mission has been promoting agriculture — at the expense of farm animals, the environment and the consumer’s right to know, he said.

Earlier this month, for example, a U.S. Dept. of Agriculture veterinarian told Congress about continuing health and safety violations at slaughterhouses, despite a year old ban on processing sick and hurt cattle with the food supply.

“It might seem crazy to mistreat animals and allow them to die,” he said, but when the industry is growing nine billion chickens twice as fast as normally would be possible, the dead chickens don’t put a dent in the profit margin.

So should shoppers pay more and buy the cage-free eggs? Yes, Prescott said. “People need to vote with their dollars,” he said, and let retailers know Americans care about animal welfare.

As for verification, the U.S. Humane Society works with suppliers to confirm companies that say they are buying cage-free are actually living up to the promise. “It is voluntary, but we do track them,” through the society’s Farm Animal Welfare branch, he said.

He is also optimistic that the plight of farm animals is improving. Ultimately, the market may be the mechanism for improving farm animal welfare.

“We’re seeing a lot of progress over the last 10 years,” he said, noting that seven U.S. states (California, Michigan, Arizona, Colorado, Maine, Oregon and Florida) have passed reforms to improve living conditions for farm animals.

Ohio is considering a similar measure, Baur said, pointing out that while state governments are taking some steps to protect animals and consumers, but raising public awareness is the key.

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