

the new *heart*

Is it possible that there's such a thing as low-fat steak? Yes. And low-fat pork chops, too.

by John Sedgwick photograph by Bill Steele

When I was growing up, Sunday dinner invariably featured potatoes, rolls, string beans and something called roast beef. It's been years, but the memory is still strong enough to excite my salivary glands. Seared to a crispy brown on the exterior, the roast grew pinker and pinker as my dad carved it into slender slices, until, at its heart, it reached that deep, juicy, thoroughly delectable red that has become the very color of dietary sin.

Roast beef went out of fashion among the smart set years ago, along with all those other fat-laden cuts that make up what the food industry somewhat grimly refers to as muscle meats. Words like *steak* and *pork chops* and *veal tenderloin* have come to be synonymous with *heart attack* in the popular imagination. But the truth is, the popular imagination, once again, has gotten a little carried away. "There's nothing wrong with including meat as a part of your regular diet," says Chris Rosenbloom, Ph.D., R.D., a professor of nutrition and dietetics at Georgia State University. "You just want to be sure the cuts are lean and the portions aren't too big."

Given the current antimeat hysteria, the idea that a little red meat here and there might be okay is close to heresy, but recent research has confirmed this startling truth. One of the better known studies was conducted by Lynne W. Scott, R.D., director of the Diet Modification Clinic at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. She prepared two diets that were virtually identical in fat and cholesterol content; one used beef and the other, chicken. She fed the beef to one group of people, the chicken to another, and discovered that, amazingly, the group that ate the red meat did not all immedi-

ately roll off their chairs and die. In fact, the different diets did not appear to affect the blood cholesterol levels of the two groups at all.

The odd and unanswered question of this study is why anyone would ever have thought there would be differences in cholesterol, given that the fat contents of the different meats were virtually identical going in. And Scott does not address the practical implications of her research. Is red meat as a part of one's diet as nutritious as chicken? That is, is the average beef dinner any fattier than the average chicken dinner? "That all depends," she says. "Is the chicken cooked with or without the skin? Is it fat-fried? Grilled? You probably don't

But not all chicken is skinless white meat, at least not in my house. Three ounces of skinless dark chicken has eight grams of fat, three ounces of chicken breast with the skin still on has nine and if the chicken is fried, see you later. The fat count jumps to 13.

Much of the credit for bringing red meat into the nutrition-conscious Nineties goes to the industry. With little fanfare, it has been mending its fatty ways. Since the early Eighties, the average cut of beef has been slimmed down in fat content by 27 percent, and the average cut of pork has been reduced by 31 percent. The changes have occurred at every stage of the business. Cattle ranchers have turned to scientists for help in identifying the ge-

If all visible fat is trimmed from the leanest cuts of beef, they come surprisingly close to poultry, with five grams of fat per three-ounce portion.

cook your chicken the way I cook mine."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) studies this sort of thing, however, and the information gleaned from its tables makes red meat look a good deal better than you might think. It's true that no red meat can quite equal the fat content of skinless chicken breast, three ounces of which includes just three grams of fat. Still, if all visible fat is trimmed from the leanest cuts of beef—the eye of round and the top round—they come surprisingly close to poultry, weighing in at just five grams of fat per three-ounce portion. (For comparison, a standard one-and-a-half-ounce doughnut has 11 grams of fat, and a tablespoon of a typical salad oil has 14.)

netic characteristics that produce slimmer cows, using the information to breed leaner herds. They have fed their cows less-fattening diets and taken them to market earlier, before they've had a chance to build up the bovine equivalent of love handles. (Age is critical to the fat content of meat; an important reason why chicken is relatively lean is that the bird you eat is a young chicken, not an old hen.) New technology, such as the ultrasound developed for human medicine, has entered the business to more precisely determine the fattiness of the carcasses and reward those ranchers who have gotten the fat out. And meatpackers are shaving that half-inch fringe of white fat that used to adorn most cuts of meat



hier meat

down to a quarter inch, an eighth or, often, nothing at all before they are shipped to retail stores.

The industry has also been toying with the meat part of the meat as well, especially with its single most popular product, the hamburger, which accounts for nearly three quarters of the beef consumed in the U.S. The results have been mixed. A few years ago, Dale L. Huffman, Ph.D., director of the Food Technology Institute at Auburn University, produced a version of hamburger with approximately half the fat of the conventional variety. He did it by beefing up his low-fat meat with carrageenan, a kind of seaweed, to keep it from tasting like cardboard and by adding a healthy pinch of salt. McDonald's introduced this concoction with

some fanfare as the McLean burger, but the public has not been particularly receptive. *The Washington Post* dubbed it the Flopper, and it is no longer available in most McDonald's restaurants.

A more promising approach to hamburger meat is provided by a Boston University School of Medicine biophysicist named Donald M. Small, M.D., who, tinkering in his kitchen, came up with a way to remove two thirds of the fat and

nearly half the cholesterol. He simply browns the meat in a saucepan with a cup or two of vegetable oil (olive oil for a spaghetti sauce, canola oil for a taco) for about 10 minutes over high heat, then drains off the liquid and rinses away any remaining fat by showering the meat briefly with hot water. Dr. Small first published his technique in *The New England Journal of Medicine* ("They made it sound more complicated than it is"), and he has laid it out for the general public in his *The Healthy Meat-Eaters' Cookbook*, which is available from Adams Publishing, Box J63, Prudential Center, Boston, MA 02199; \$14.95.

Small's technique works only on ground meat, however. The best way to cut down the fat content of a slice of meat is to be selective at the meat counter. The meat industry has sufficient influence with the USDA that unlike every other food item in the supermarket, meat is not required to have labels on its products listing nutritional information. Plus, there are enough different terms for all the cuts of meat to fill a small dictionary. But the rule of thumb is easy enough: Buy the meat that comes from the rear end of the animal. As with humans, fat accumulates on (continued on page 184)

meat

(continued from page 183)

a cow's middle regions. The key words to remember are *loin* and *round*. Sirloin, tenderloin, top round, eye of round—these are the cuts that tend to be lowest in fat. In meat lingo, *choice* means lean and *select* means leaner still. To be fair, it should be pointed out that the fat is the part that makes meat taste good, so you may not want to get rid of absolutely all of it.

For all the improvements in the meat industry, it still has its drawbacks. It is prodigiously wasteful of land and grain. And, of course, it is not particularly kind to the animals it raises. I suspect that the apparent cruelty of the industry is the main reason that so many people are suspicious of the nutritional benefits of its products. They assume that such bad things must result in products that are bad for you. But vegetarianism certainly isn't a nutritional nirvana. "Look at the Buddha," says Johanna T. Dwyer, D.Sc., R.D., director of the Frances Stern Nutrition Center at the New England Medical Center in Boston, referring to the most famous vegetarian of them all. "He was really fat."

Early fears that vegetarians might not get enough protein now appear overblown, but there is evidence that giving up meat can create deficiencies of vitamin B₁₂, which is found primarily in foods derived from animals, and iron. Seems vegetarians, too, need to watch what they eat. "Just because your diet doesn't include meat doesn't mean it's healthy," says Dr. Rosenbloom. "I know students who live on french fries and Cokes and think they're doing themselves a favor. They'd be better off ordering a hamburger."

Meat eating does seem to be fairly well ingrained. Despite all the bad publicity, the average American still puts away 166 pounds of the stuff every year, a figure that shows no sign of waning, and the steak house is now one of the hottest components of the restaurant business. Chicken made serious inroads between 1976 and 1991, largely because of its perceived convenience and low price, but beef has been climbing back since.

There is no question that Americans would do better to lay off the junk food and eat more grains and vegetables, two categories of food that, when sensibly prepared, are truly low in fat. But meat needn't be demonized. As with all things, it should be enjoyed in moderation: no more than six ounces a day of the leanest cuts you can bear. Be a little choosier when you shop the meat counter or place your order in a restaurant, and hamburger is probably not a great idea for now. As for me, I'm thinking that, some Sunday, I might gather my family around me and try roast beef again, if only to give my children a taste of the good old days.

...And the meat goes on

Meat used to be good for us, back when protein was king. Then came the big fat scare, and we gave up steaks and pork chops and hamburgers. Now, we've learned that it's not the meat, it's the portion. And the cut. Hamburgers are still too fatty, but steak, lamb chops and pot roast are back on the list for healthy eating. Just skim the following list, and you'll be amazed to learn that some cuts of meat are no fattier than a chicken breast. Each of the entries is based on a three-ounce portion that has been roasted or broiled and stripped of every bit of visible fat, including the delectable chicken skin (except where noted).

meat	fat	cholesterol
Chicken breast	3 g	73 mg
Chicken breast, fried, with skin	13 g	83 mg
Chicken thigh, fried at fast-food restaurant, with skin	26 g	121 mg
Turkey, light meat	3 g	59 mg
Turkey drumstick, with skin	10 g	76 mg
Pork tenderloin	4 g	67 mg
Pork top loin	6 g	66 mg
Pork top loin, fried	13 g	66 mg
Cured ham	5 g	47 mg
Cured ham, seam fat remaining*	14 g	53 mg
Porterhouse steak	9 g	68 mg
Eye of round	5 g	59 mg
Top round	5 g	71 mg
New York strip	7 g	65 mg
Sirloin	6 g	76 mg
Flank steak	9 g	57 mg
T-bone steak	9 g	68 mg
Choice tenderloin	9 g	71 mg
Chuck arm pot roast, braised	6 g	89 mg
Chuck blade pot roast, braised	13 g	90 mg
Brisket, braised	13 g	77 mg
Hamburger, regular grade, browned and drained	17 g	89 mg
Hamburger, extra lean, browned and drained	13 g	84 mg
Veal tenderloin	6 g	90 mg
Veal cutlets, breaded and fried	8 g	95 mg
Hot dog	25 g	54 mg
Leg of lamb	5 g	76 mg
Leg of lamb, trimmed, seam fat remaining*	14 g	79 mg
Lamb chops	7 g	82 mg
Lamb chops, seam fat remaining*	20 g	85 mg
Tuna, baked	5 g	42 mg
Flounder, sole and other white fish	1 g	58 mg
Salmon, baked	7 g	54 mg
Ostrich	2 g	66 mg
Squirrel	3 g	82 mg
Elk	2 g	62 mg

Sources: USDA Handbook 8; American Ostrich Association; SELF research

*Seam fat is the strips of fat within the actual "seams" of the meat.