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We're Eating Less Meat. Why?

By Mark Bittman



[Mark Bittman](#) on food and all things related.

Americans eat more meat than any other population in the world; about one-sixth of the total, though we're less than one-twentieth of the population.

But that's changing.

Until recently, almost everyone considered their dinner plate naked without a big old hunk of meat on it. (You remember "[Beef: It's What's for Dinner](#)," of course. How could you forget?) And we could afford it: our production methods and the denial of their true costs have kept meat cheap beyond all credibility. (American hamburger is arguably the cheapest convenience food there is.) This, in part, is why we spend a [smaller percentage](#) of our money on food than any other country, and much of that goes toward the roughly half-pound of meat each of us eats, on average, every day.

But that's changing, and considering the fairly steady climb in meat consumption over the last half-century, you might say the numbers are plummeting. The [department of agriculture projects](#) that our meat and poultry consumption will fall again this year, to about 12.2 percent less in 2012 than it was in 2007. Beef consumption has been in decline for about 20 years; the drop in chicken is even more dramatic, over the last five years or so; pork also has been steadily slipping for about five years.

The report treats consumers as victims of government bias against the meat industry. We're eating less meat because we want to eat less meat.

Holy cow. What's up?

It's easy enough to round up the usual suspects, which is what a story in the [Daily Livestock Report](#) did last month. It blames the decline on growing exports, which make less meat available for Americans to buy. It blames it on ethanol, which has caused feed costs to rise, production to drop and prices to go up so producers can cover their increasing costs. It blames drought. It doesn't blame recession, which is surprising, because that's a factor also.

All of which makes some sense. The report then goes on to blame the federal government for “wag[ing] war on meat protein consumption” over the last 30-40 years.

Is this like the war on drugs? The war in Afghanistan? The war against cancer? Because what I see here is:

- a history of subsidies for the corn and soy that’s fed to livestock
- a nearly free pass on environmental degradation and animal abuse
- an unwillingness to meaningfully limit [the use of antibiotics](#) in animal feed
- a failure to curb the stifling power that [corporate meatpackers](#) wield over smaller ranchers
- and what amounts to a refusal — despite the advice of real, disinterested experts, true scientists in fact — to unequivocally [tell American consumers](#) that they should be eating less meat

Or is the occasional environmental protection regulation and whisper that unlimited meat at every meal might not be ideal the equivalent of war? Is [the U.S.D.A. buying \\$40 million worth of chicken products](#) to reduce the surplus and raise retail prices the equivalent of war?

No. It’s not the non-existent federal War on Meat that’s making a difference. And even if availability is down, it’s not as if we’re going to the supermarket and finding empty meat cases and deli counters filled with coleslaw. The flaw in the report is that it treats American consumers as passive actors who are victims of diminishing supplies, rising costs and government bias against the meat industry. *Nowhere* does it mention that we’re eating less meat because we *want* to eat less meat.

Yet conscious decisions are being made by consumers. Even [buying less meat](#) because prices are high and times are tough is a choice; other “sacrifices” could be made. We could cut back on junk food, or shirts or iPhones, which have a *very* high meat-equivalent, to coin a term. Yet even though excess supply kept chicken prices lower than the year before, demand dropped.

Some are choosing to eat less meat for all the right reasons. The Values Institute at DGWB Advertising and Communications just named [the rise of “flexitarianism”](#) — an eating style that reduces the amount of meat without “going vegetarian” — as one of its top five consumer health trends for 2012. In an [Allrecipes.com](#) survey of 1,400 members, more than one-third of home cooks said they ate less meat in 2011 than in 2010. Back in June, a survey found that 50 percent of American adults said they were aware of the [Meatless Monday](#) campaign, with 27 percent of those aware reporting that they were actively [reducing their meat consumption](#).

I can add, anecdotally, that when I ask audiences I speak to, “How many of you are eating less meat than you were 10 years ago?” at least two-thirds raise their hands. A self-selecting group to be sure, but nevertheless one that exists.

In fact, let’s ask this: is *anyone* in this country eating *more* meat than they used to?

We still eat way more meat than is good for us or the environment, not to mention the animals. But a 12 percent reduction in just five years is significant, and if that decline were to continue for the next five years — well, that’s something few would have imagined five years ago. It’s something only the industry could get upset about. The rest of us should celebrate. Rice and beans, anyone?