



From the Stable to the Table

A look at the journey from the farm, to the slaughter house, to the plate.

by Liz Brown

Shamez Amlani's little restaurant, La Palette, sits in Toronto's Queen Street west neighbourhood among fabric shops, furniture stores and fashion boutiques. An old-world Parisian feel permeates the bistro with its checkered floor, open kitchen, mismatched table cloths and the ceramic horse head mounted on one wall. If one were inclined to imagining – and this place was on the opposite side of the Atlantic – it might be where writers like Hemingway found solace in absinthe.

"Fun fact," says Amlani as he prepares a café Americano at the bar. "This building was originally used as a horse stable."

He grins as he carries the coffee over. Amlani's cheeky approach to the horse meat debate and his refusal to kowtow to protesters and remove equine permanently from the menu has made his restaurant a target for anti-horse slaughter activists. His horsey offerings include a Escabeche Chevaline Nicoise, which has horse heart and tongue tossed in a nicoise salad; Cheval, a horse tenderloin served with an oat risotto; and the Quack 'n' Track, a dish that offers horse tenderloin and a duck leg confit. These dishes don't come cheap. A helping of nicoise rings in at \$18, and the other two plates are both \$35.

CHRISTINA HANDLEY PHOTO



These horses await their fate in an auction pen at the Ontario Livestock Exchange.

Amlani's horse isn't just pricey, it's also controversial.

In 2011, an investigative report by *Toronto Star* reporter Robert Cribb illuminated the welfare concerns of shipping compromised horses long distances from auction houses in the US to a slaughter house in Quebec, and the possibility that harmful drug residues were present in the horse meat that was being served in Toronto restaurants.

Amlani did pull horsemeat from the menu for a time in order to investigate the food safety claims, but brought it back in February 2012. "I spent a lot of time calling veterinarians and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency because I wanted to know what the origin and safety of the meat was. I was quite satisfied with the information that I got. I was satisfied that the meat was safe to eat, first and foremost," he said.

There's little doubt customer demand also played into Amlani's decision to bring it back. He said that sales of horse meat have increased five-fold since he opened his restaurant 12 years ago. Behind beef and duck, it's the most asked-for item on the menu. He shared a tale of a horse rancher from California who travelled to Toronto for a weekend to try the horse meat at La Palette and chatted about the steady stream of European and Asian customers who come for the horse. There's the curious, too, who flock to La Palette to try something new and controversial.

Amlani shares something in common with a select group of people in the horse world: the realization there's money to be made off equines that nobody wants.

Horse groups, most notably the Canadian Quarter Horse Association, the Appaloosa Horse Club of Canada, the Horse Welfare Alliance of Canada, and many provincial equestrian bodies view the slaughter industry as a viable solution to the problem of the unwanted horse. They cite cases in the US of starving horses, neglect and animals turned loose in the wild as examples of what happens when slaughter isn't an option.



This suffering pony is on display to buyers at an auction.

What they fail to mention, however, is that slaughter is also the most cost-effective, convenient and profitable way to deal with unwanted horses.

Horse meat is big business in Canada. In 2011, we exported nearly 16-million kilograms of horse meat to the tune of \$83-million, most of it to European Union (EU) countries like Switzerland and France. When the US Congress banned funding for horse meat inspections in 2006, effectively shuttering the slaughter plants there, Canada and Mexico stepped up to provide a solution for the glut of unwanted horses in the US. In fact, from 2007 to 2008, the number of horses slaughtered here jumped from almost 80,000 to 113,000. In 2011, more than 89,000 horses were slaughtered within our borders.

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Horses bound for slaughter are no longer allowed to be transported in double deck trailers such as this, due to welfare concerns.

The Long Road to the End

It's a long and winding route that a horse must take to end up on a plate at a restaurant like La Palette, and along the way multiple people earn their living from the trade. Amlani buys his horse meat – mostly tenderloins – from a specialized meat broker for about \$17.50 a pound. That broker sources it directly from slaughter houses like Richelieu Meat in Massueville, QC. Richelieu buys their horses from people who gather them at auctions where they are sold by the pound. One such auction is the Ontario Livestock Exchange in Waterloo, which sells horses this way every Tuesday, starting around noon.

On a sunny day at the end of September, the Ontario Livestock Exchange (OLEX) is bustling with buyers and sellers attending the horse sale. There are a few women from rescue groups and a handful of kill buyers, along with self-proclaimed 'hoof kickers.'

Behind the cattle sit a dozen or so pens that house small groups of horses – most look to be Standardbreds and Quarter Horses, with a few miniatures, drafts, Warmbloods and Appaloosas in the mix. All of the horses appear in good health and weight, with the exception of one group of five – brought by the same person – that are on the thin side.

This particular day, the average price paid was \$0.27 a pound. The majority of these horses were bought by kill buyers, who will then ship them to Richelieu, where they will sell them to the slaughter house for prices ranging from \$0.45 a pound up to \$0.95 a pound, which is paid out after the horse is butchered. The payment is based on hanging weight – the weight of a whole side of horse that hasn't yet been divided into smaller cuts of meat.

Unlike more commonly consumed meats in North America like beef or poultry, the vast majority of these horses in North America weren't raised with the intention they would end up on a dinner plate at a high-end restaurant. Many had careers before they found themselves at OLEX. There are ex-racehorses, riding and driving horses and animals with soundness or temperament problems for which no one can find a practical use. Some are young and unbroke, the byproducts of over-zealous breeding programs in a stagnant economy.

This mixed bag of horses that enter the human food chain has drawn the criticism of horse slaughter opponents, veterinarians and toxicologists. Of particular concern is the potential presence of the painkiller phenylbutazone (bute) and the bronchodilator clenbuterol in horse meat.

Bute residue in horse meat has come under the most scrutiny because of its widespread use in the horses. Considered the 'Aspirin' of the horse world, it's an anti-inflammatory drug commonly used to treat pain and fever. It's also a known carcinogen in humans and can cause aplastic anemia, a condition where bone marrow does not replenish blood cells sufficiently. Left untreated, aplastic anemia can lead to death within six months.

In the EU, the use of bute was banned in 1998 because horses there are frequently considered a food animal. It was only when a lifetime tracking system was introduced and horses were labeled as part of the food chain or excluded from the food chain that bute was put back on the shelves. It is banned in horses intended for slaughter because, at present, toxicologists don't know how long it takes for its presence to clear from horse meat.

It's a long and winding route that a horse must take to end up on a plate at a restaurant like La Palette, and along the way multiple people earn their living from the trade.



Horses of all ages, breeds, abilities and temperaments end up on feedlots.

In an email, a media relations official at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) assures that horse meat is safe and does not contain drug residues. "Food safety is a top priority for the Government of Canada. ... Meat from an animal suspected of harbouring diseases or residues is withheld and sampled and tested by the CFIA to verify if it is safe. Meat testing is also done on randomly selected normal carcasses to detect trends in the potential misuse of drugs. ... Overall the compliance rate in Canada for veterinary drug residues in meat is very high, generally in the high 90 per cent range."

The CFIA's sampling is based on "targeted sampling, designed to detect a one per cent violation rate with a 95 per cent confidence. In 2009, 143 samples of equine meat were tested for phenylbutazone from 93,946 horses that were slaughtered in Canada that year. Mathematically speaking, 0.15 per cent of horses slaughtered are tested for traces of phenylbutazone.

On their website, the CFIA also addresses the issue of phenylbutazone in horse meat, stating that on top of random sampling, they employ "veterinarians and supervised, trained inspectors in each horse slaughter plant to identify any animal that, based on its appearance or history, may have been treated with phenylbutazone."

This method of testing doesn't settle the mind of Sinikka Crosland, executive director of the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition, a group that seeks to shut down the horse slaughter industry in Canada. "As a horse person, I know that the use of phenylbutazone on family farms is a common practice," she said.

In Crosland's opinion, the visual inspection performed by CFIA officials is dubious at best. "They would not be likely to discern from the outside of a horse what oral drugs had been administered. They may suspect that foundered or injured horses may have received drugs but ... they should not be relying on guesswork to determine if slaughter-bound horses have ingested drugs that are not permitted in the food chain."

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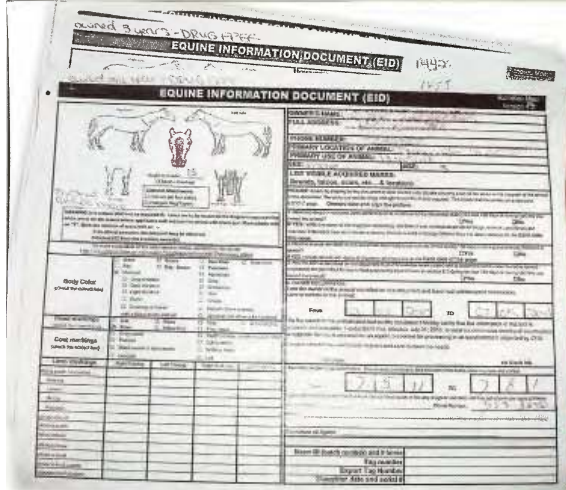
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A stack of Equine Information Documents, which must accompany all slaughter-bound horses. The top two visible forms claim that the horses have been drug-free for a year, and three years.

Tagged and delivered, these stressed and emaciated horses are at the end of the line, being held at a slaughter plant.



Despite guarantees from the CFIA that these are well-respected testing guidelines, horse meat with phenylbutazone is slipping through. On July 27, 2012, the EU issued a food alert that horse meat shipped from Canada to Belgium tested positive for phenylbutazone.

This sort of slip-up wasn't supposed to happen according to the CFIA's system. In July 2010, the CFIA implemented a system requiring people selling horses for slaughter to keep a record of medical treatments the horse had received over the past six months in an Equine Information Document (EID). This move was made to fall in line with EU standards regarding drug residues in meat.

The document requires descriptive information on the horse, its six-month medical history and a signed owner declaration stating the information is accurate and complete. While an EID is helpful in theory, its real-world application isn't so clear.

On this day at OLEX, a Standardbred who had raced only five weeks before was sent through the auction, its owners declaring it had been drug-free for the past five years. When I ask Jeff Grof, a kill buyer who is at OLEX almost every Tuesday, about the probability that this horse was, in fact, drug-free, he shrugs his shoulders. "Is it impossible for that to happen? No. It's not impossible. Is it likely?" He pauses. "I'm not signing the papers. I can't say, 'Well, I think this is truthful, I think this is not truthful.' That's not my job. My job is to buy horses with valid certificates."

An illustration of how easy it is to fabricate the drug history of a horse on such documents is the case of Ronald Andio, an Ohio horse seller. On July 9, 2012, the US Food and Drug Administration issued a warning letter to Andio, who had shipped horses for slaughter to Canada, whose meat tested positive for phenylbutazone and clenbuterol. The letter noted: "You admitted that you filled out and signed the producer's name to this form and did not inquire of the producer the medication status of this animal. You provided this EID to the dealer who purchased this animal from you."

Welfare Concerns

Back in Waterloo, Grof grapples not only with EIDs, but also activists who are morally opposed to the slaughter of horses. A tall man with dark hair, Grof can be found in the front row next to the OLEX auction ring, pen in hand, with a stack of papers next to him on most Tuesdays. Buying horses and selling them for slaughter is a business to him – he's been doing it for 20 years. His father was in the business too.

When the auction is over and he's purchased 45 horses, he settles down at a table in a private room at OLEX, crossing his arms, a wary look on his face. His business has become more difficult because of the new documentation rules and shipping regulations (horses shipped for meat are no longer allowed to be transported in double deck trailers because of welfare issues).

"There are issues with activists," he conceded. "They're constantly giving misinformation. There's lots of stuff going out there that's utter lies, but they're working to generate revenue for their cause. They want to stop horse slaughter completely and they'll go to any length to try to do that."

Horse welfare is a common issue brought up by both sides of the slaughter debate. Those against slaughter paint a gruesome picture of equine suffering with long transport rides to slaughter facilities and improper handling and slaughter techniques. In the spring of 2012, the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition released footage of horses being slaughtered at Les Viandes de la Petit-Nations in Quebec. The videos are graphic and show that nearly half of the horses were not stunned after the first shot with a captive bolt gun, the type of gun used to slaughter cattle, which is applied to the forehead of the animal and releases a metal bolt/rod at force, and can fail to induce unconsciousness, requiring multiple attempts. "These horses showed clear signs of ineffective stunning or revival in the form of remaining standing, standing back up, whinnying or head-shaking. Up to 11 attempts were made to stun one horse who suffered almost four minutes," stated the report.

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Those who support slaughter paint a picture of equine suffering at the hands of neglectful owners, or caretakers who have fallen on hard times and can't afford to feed their animals. And while slaughter may be a preferable end to starvation, horses that are thin and of poor quality aren't necessarily preferred by slaughter houses who are selling a product to restaurants like La Palette.

At OLEX, the group of thin horses aren't drawing many bids in the auction ring. "My plant does not want to deal with that type of horse because they are poor quality and it's poor quality meat. You try not to buy horses like that, but you need to deal with them, you can't give them back to the guy," said Grof.

And if he buys the animals out of welfare concerns, it becomes a losing business proposition. "Could they be fattened up? Possibly. Would it be worth your while to fatten them? Absolutely not."

OLEX general manager Larry Witzel said it's extremely rare that a horse will come into the auction and not be sold. "If it's a good healthy horse it's going to have some value, obviously," he said.

As for potential welfare concerns, he noted that the Humane Society is at OLEX on a regular basis to monitor the health of the horses that come through. "That's part of the

positive of the horses coming to the market," he said. "If there is anything that comes to the market that's in poor, poor condition, that gives the Humane Society an opportunity to look at it and go check out the farm to make sure everything is okay on the farm."

Some horse lovers have organized to save these equines from a slaughter house fate. While many are in the more 'traditional' business of horse rescue – buying animals at auction, then rehabilitating and retraining them to eventually be re-homed, there are other rescuers who have taken a more original approach.

In Gatineau, QC, Tracey Hoogveen operates Need You Now Equine, a Facebook group that links potential adopters to horses that are at a feedlot, waiting to be sent to the slaughter house. "These feed lots are like collection pens," she said. "All the horses that the dealers buy come into these pens until they have a full load to ship to slaughter."

The time spent at a feedlot varies based on how long it takes for the dealer to collect a full load of horses – about 25 animals. "The time they spend at a feed lot can be as short as 24 hours," she said.

With the cooperation of one feedlot owner, Hoogveen uses that short window of time to try to find homes for the horses. Three times a week she heads out to the feedlot to identify the

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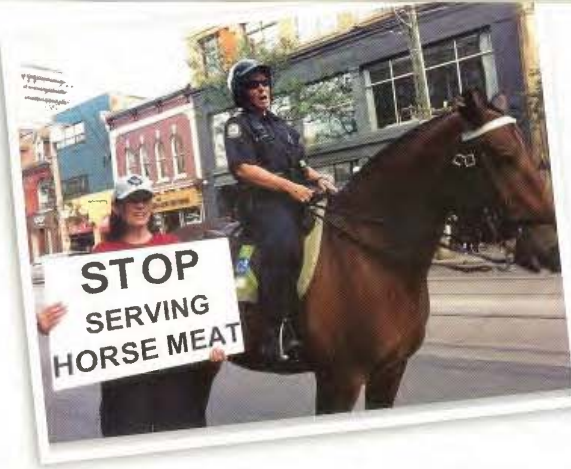
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A protester at Toronto's La Palette restaurant, which serves horse meat.

ones that come in that stand the best chance for adoption and then posts them on the Facebook group. If a person wants to buy the horse, Hoogeveen sets up the transaction between the potential new owner and the feedlot owner. Since December 2011, Hoogeveen has found homes for more than 350 horses using this method. "I'm not pro- or anti-slaughter, I'm just doing this to help the horses," she said.

Drug Residue

While animal welfare has always been a sticking point between pro- and anti-slaughter groups, a new battle front is the drug residues issue and a looming deadline for Canada to meet EU traceability requirements for horses destined for slaughter. As part of the EU's animal health strategy to minimize animal disease outbreaks and maximize food safety, the region has laid down new requirements for their imports, including horse meat from Canada. One of those requirements is that by the summer of 2013, all horses intended for slaughter must be accompanied by a lifetime passport that records the veterinary drugs the horse has received.

Since 2003, Equine Canada has been researching the best methods to implement a national tracking system for horses that would record not only veterinary treatments, but also movement, performance and pedigree data. In March 2010, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada approved funding up to \$478,766 to Equine Canada to do preliminary research on developing a system.

To date, they do not yet have a system in place. However, Dr. Edward Kendall, chair of Equine Canada's Equine ID Committee said that implementation of such a system will take place in phases. "These (EU) deadlines are real deadlines, but these people understand the pressures that governments are under, they understand how difficult it is to implement national systems," he said.

Horse Welfare Alliance of Canada (HWAC) executive Bill DesBarres has been involved in discussions about traceability with Equine Canada and has recently put forth his own solution to the traceability conundrum in a 'call to action' letter he sent out to equine industry stakeholders at the end of September. In it, he talked about HWAC's plan called Equine Traceability Canada, which would provide an online portal through a company called Animal ID Solutions that would record all necessary information. "In a little over a year, we have established a database that will record everything and we didn't get a dime from the government for it," said DesBarres. "Equine Canada has not developed a system they think will work."

While DesBarres may have a system he thinks will work for traceability, it's difficult to say if horse owners will buy in. After all, DesBarres, a Medicine Hat, AB., Appaloosa breeder has come under fire from horse slaughter opponents who claim HWAC is merely a front for the slaughter industry. While DesBarres insists there is more to HWAC than just promoting slaughter, pointing to many articles on its website about horse rehabilitation and responsible horse ownership, the organization lists as one of its partners the Calgary, Alberta-based Bouvry Exports, the largest horse slaughter plant in North America. Slaughter opponents also note that HWAC does not have partnerships with any horse rescue operations.

As the equine industry as a whole continues to grapple with traceability issues not only for meat, but disease tracking and movement requirements, horses given banned substances continue to go for slaughter. "Canada was given a window of time to demonstrate they were moving towards lifetime traceability. The system that Canada has put in place, with the EID appears to be a satisfactory interim solution," said Kendall.

But that's small comfort for a nation questioning food safety protocols in the wake of the XL Foods massive *E. coli* outbreak last year.

Researchers are beginning to sound alarm bells about drug residues in horse meat, too. In 2010, the journal *Food and Chemical Toxicology* published a paper – *Association of phenylbutazone usage with horses bought for slaughter: A public health risk*, which demonstrated that horses that had recently been given phenylbutazone were shipped for slaughter.

Many of those who support a slaughter ban point to this paper as evidence that North American horses shouldn't be ending up on dinner plates. The authors of the paper discuss the health risks phenylbutazone poses to humans and highlight that "traces of PBZ will remain as a contaminant of horsemeat in previously treated horses for a very long and as yet undetermined period of time."

The authors record violations of drug residue regulations, but they don't note any documented cases of people

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A member of the Canadian Horse Defence Coalition addresses the media at an anti-horse slaughter protest.

requires buy-ins from a lot of different groups. There has to be a huge reform and a huge paradigm shift in the mindset of what we're going to do with horses."

As for Amlani back at La Palette, he said his customers would be willing to pay a lot more to ensure their entrees were healthy and humanely treated. "I would be glad to pay more to get some kind of guarantee," he said. "For us, whether we're charging \$35 or \$40 or more for a steak, our customers don't blink." 🐾

See the May/June issue for more information on the Universal Equine Life Number, a universal traceability system for horses, and what it means for all facets of the Canadian horse industry.

becoming ill after consuming horse meat containing bute, or its metabolite oxyphenbutazone. "There is a perceived risk, but whether that perceived risk is real or not remains to be determined," said Dr. Kendall, who holds a master's degree in biochemistry and a PhD in biophysics.

Dr. Trisha Dowling, professor of veterinary clinical pharmacology at the University of Saskatchewan, is less reserved in her assessment of the 'perceived risk.' "The paper ... is misleading and fear mongering," she said.

Dowling has received funding by the Alberta Livestock and Meats Agency to do a phenylbutazone depletion study in horses, which she plans to have finished by this fall. "Once our data is peer-reviewed and published, then we scientists can really start the discussion on the use of bute in horses intended for food," she said.

Business as Usual

For now, the horse meat business is humming along in Canada. Every Tuesday, Grof is still at OLEX, buying horses that nobody else seems to want. "I've asked a lot of activists who want to shut down this industry what they're going to do with these horses. You've got to do something. There are 45 horses today I bought, plus the other guy [another kill buyer] probably bought another 35. What are we going to do with them if we don't slaughter them?" he asked.

Indeed, the three women who arrived who were part of a horse rescue group walked out of the auction without a single horse, noting on their Facebook group page afterwards that they first needed to find homes for the horses they already had.

Heather Clemenceau, a horse slaughter opponent and blogger who regularly skewers the slaughter industry admits there's no easy answer. "I'm not going to come out and say it's going to be an easy task. It's not. It

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