
DRESSED TO KILL: CONFESSIONS OF A COWARDLY CARNIVORE

BY ROSIE DEQUATTRO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA

“Would you like to see how it’s done?”

Barney Blood was offering to show me the slaughterhouse operation. Wanting to seem casual about it, I answered “Sure, why not? What’s a story about butchers without going whole hog—so to speak?” Silence. I pressed-on. “What I mean is, without reporting the whole picture.”

He wasn’t listening to me. The fifth-generation owner of this eponymous meat processing business in West Groton has probably heard all the puns and way too many “blood” jokes in his 84 years. He was talking to his assistant, daughter-in-law Sharon Blood.

I gulped; my inner chatter intensified: I’ve been a meat eater my whole life, right? Wasn’t it high time I confronted, face-to-face, this carnivore’s dilemma? After all, meat is local, too.

Sharon helped me into a white paper dress and ugly white shower cap. There was no mirror but I know how I look in hats and it’s not pretty. I followed Blood out of the dark office and across the sun-stabbed macadam, toward another building, low sloping and discreet. It had a worn metal door and a big, clanging latch you grabbed and swung aside. Blood carefully ushered me over the raised threshold. It was pretty cold inside.

Sunlight flooded the room from the open door, rendering everything inside momentarily black. In the same instant, the door clanged shut behind me and the four men in the room

turned to stare at us, briefly, then resumed their jobs and ignored us, as if they were used to being observed. Later, I was struck by how little noise there had been, not the bellowing and mayhem I had expected, just the clanging of the hot-water hopper and some good-natured banter among the four butchers, like an ordinary day at the office.



But there’s little that’s ordinary about Blood Farm. For one thing, it’s the only USDA-certified meat processing facility in Massachusetts. The tidy house and buildings sit gracefully along a timeless, rolling section of Route 225, looking like an illustration from one of Robert McCloskey’s storybooks. There are houses all around and no one has ever objected to having a slaughterhouse in the neighborhood. “If they do I haven’t heard about it,” Blood says with a chuckle. “Besides, the neighbors are all customers.”

Bloods have lived in Groton since 1660. They are direct descendants of Richard Blood, who in the late 1600s was granted 60 acres of land in Groton by the king of England. The current owner and family patriarch, Barney Blood, was born right across the road from the farm, in the same room his father was born in. Blood learned butchering from his father, but he didn’t always want to be a butcher.

“It really wasn’t what I wanted to do,” he says. He had planned to go to college and study law, but delayed his entrance to help his father in the business. “I discovered I really



The Blood Family - Four Generations

liked it; it kind of grew on me.” So he stayed.

An avuncular, gregarious and frugal Yankee (he’s the first to admit it), Blood is full of great old stories. Once, he tells me, when he was hiring meat cutters he asked a prospect if he had any experience with meat cutting. “‘Oh yes,’ says the man. ‘Last Sunday I cut the roast for my wife,’” says Blood, laughing.

A prerequisite for a good meat cutter is having “good eyes,” he explains to me, which leads him to another story, this one about Mohammed Atta. Remember those eyes? A few days before the September 11 attacks, Atta and a few other Muslims came by Blood Farm to buy lambs. Muslims often come by the farm, as do Jews—both groups needing meat slaughtered in accordance with religious laws. For Jews, the laws of kashrut dictate that the animal be conscious at the point of death and that the animal’s throat be slit horizontally, not vertically. Both

a rabbi and a government inspector need to be present. For Muslims, the rules of halal apply, which are similar: the animal must not be stunned first. Blood Farm regularly accommodates these rituals.

Atta “had eyes that intrigued me—they looked right through you.” On that September day, Atta argued with Blood that he could buy lambs cheaper in Cambridge. “Well, I said, then you better go back to Cambridge. I didn’t think much about it until his picture came out in the papers and I said ‘Oh my God, that’s the fella that was here.’ I showed it to my daughter-in-law and to others who all recognized him as the one who was here just a few days before. And then I called the police and they sent investigators.” The investigation later confirmed it was Atta, all right.

My eyes adjusted to the light and I saw that the room was a little bigger than a two-car garage, colorless, clean, with a con-

crete floor that sloped toward a drain. I saw water hoses lying about. Chains, hooks and pulleys hung from the ceiling. One of the hooks, the one closest to me, held a large pig that was in the process of becoming two halves. It hung from its back legs, head down. A man with a knife was tending to it. Another man stood in front of a noisy metal contraption that was lifting and rolling a pig around in hot water. The tall, lanky man in the far corner gave me a friendly smile then looked a little sheepish as he reached for something on the wall behind him.

The fourth man, looking as ridiculous as me in a white paper coat and shower cap, Blood identified as a USDA inspector. He approached me, holding up his hand, and warned, “Stand back. We’re about to fire a gun. Leave now if you don’t want to watch.” The gracious Blood asked, “You OK? Let me know if you’re going to be sick.” Trying my best to sound cool and composed, I said, “Don’t worry about me—I’ll be fine. I’ll just stand over here out of the way,” and cowered behind Blood.

There is no dearth of news stories exposing the practices of industrialized animal production. A handful of huge corporations produce most of the country’s meats. Some of the hygiene and handling practices at meat processing facilities are drawing increasing public attention. Consider that Tyson Foods, one of the world’s largest meat processing companies, processes about 180,000 cattle and 350,000 pigs every week. In these huge operations, a minute of “down time” can mean the loss of hundreds of dollars.

In contrast, Blood Farm processes 150 to 200 animals per week. At their retail store you can buy beef, lamb, sausages and veal from local farms, humanely processed and as fresh as you can get it without slaughtering it yourself. This is no boutique business. It’s a no-frills butcher shop selling every conceivable cut and preparation of meat. There are reasonably priced pork chops, crown roasts, cube steak and fresh bacon; baby-back ribs, rack of lamb, veal loin chops and stew meat; and these are just a few of the items on the extensive menu.

“We have a lot of call right now for Angus,” Blood tells me. “Of course, we have to pay more for it so we have to charge more. It has to be certified.” Ever the practical New Englander, Blood says, “I had one woman come in and ask for Angus hamburger—we didn’t have any, so she left without buying anything. But I can guarantee you that if I gave her a package of Angus and a package of Hereford of the same quality she couldn’t tell the difference.”

Also, right now there’s a big call for barbecue pigs, mostly for backyard parties, about 25 a week. There is a smokehouse on

the premises where they smoke their own hams and other meats. And not much is wasted on the farm. Drug companies come by and buy pigs’ jaws, and pancreases. Mass Eye and Ear buys eyes. The Japanese take blood. “We have a lot of call for food for dogs because of the Chinese dog-food scare,” he adds.



During our interview, Blood explains the distinction between *butchers*, which he considers to be those who know how to both slaughter and cut meat, and *meat cutters*, those who take whole sides of beef/pork/lamb and section it into the pieces we all recognize. So-called butchers these days rarely start with a whole animal or even a half. Today, when you go to the “butcher,” whether to an independent butcher shop or to the supermarket meat department, the men in the stained white coats mainly trim fat and/or prepare cuts for orders from pre-cut meat shipped to them in boxes. Even vintage butcher shops in the North End receive their meat this way, packaged, from big processing plants (slaughterhouses) out West.

Blood Farm’s animals arrive alive and healthy from various sources: small New England farms that raise two or three animals at a time; individuals who have raised their animal for custom processing; and from 4-H Clubs. Blood loves to buy animals at the 4-H Fairs. “I favor the 4-H projects and the kids that raise lambs. I pay them a premium to encourage them to raise lambs,” says Blood, who remembers his own children

benefiting from 4-H membership. He also uses a broker who buys animals from auction houses.

Back in the slaughterhouse, things started moving fast. The group continued working at their individual stations, bisecting the hanging pig, tossing around the other one in the hot water bath. But now the friendly guy was opening a low sliding door near him and letting in the most enormous pig I've ever seen. It was all black. It filled the small pen it had been led into. It balked a little at being pushed and confined, but only briefly. What the tall man had reached for behind him was the stun gun, a shiny metal hand-held thing that looked like a large pneumatic staple gun. The pig soon quieted and calmly turned to face the man, who planted the gun squarely on the pig's forehead.

BANG! The animal bucked and kicked for several seconds, but Blood assured me that it wasn't alive any longer; the shot had killed it instantly. I think I must have looked away then because the next thing I saw wasn't the pig slumped over in the pen, but the pig being hoisted by a pulley and dangling from its back legs. One of the men, it might have been the one who had bisected the previous pig, made a vertical cut of the pig's throat. Blood spilled out and was hosed away down the drain. That was as much as I saw.

Still a carnivore, I made a last stop at the Blood Farm retail store and loaded up on packages of lamb sausage, sweet Italian sausage, steaks and a pork tenderloin which Sharon got for me right out of the meat cutting room—can't get much fresher than that. I thought about the effort I make to know where my fruits and vegetables come from, to try to buy only local and in-season to insure freshness. Why not meat?

Blood Farm
94 W. Main St.
West Groton, MA 01472
(978) 448-6669
Custom orders, custom processing

Free-lance food writer and a member of SlowFood, Rosie DeQuattro lives in Acton, MA, with her furniture-maker/physician husband, Jerry Berke, and their dog, Rita. Rosie can be reached at rosiedequat@hotmail.com.

Michael Piazza (www.michaelpiazzaphotography.com) was born and raised and schooled in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2000 his photography career moved him to New York City. While working for such clients as Saveur, Food Arts and The Australian Financial Review, Michael also contributed work to Slow Food USA and Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard. He has recently completed two cookbooks - Simple Italian Sandwiches and A Ligurian Kitchen. He currently lives in Watertown with his wife and two tail-less cats.



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