

## HORSE, OF COURSE

*A desire sated, an insight gained*

by Luke Meinzen

**A**s a child, I had little to do with horses outside the coin-operated mustang in the IGA. We were corn-fed van people—horses were for cowboys and adventurers, people I only saw and envied in movies.

At the University of Michigan, however, I had a history professor with a knack for storytelling. He described how a 13th century Mongol horseman would rotate through a string of mounts, survive on the blood and meat of the weakest, and remain constantly moving through conquest and the seasons.

Their brutal simplicity was an attractive counterpoint to my comfortable mundane middle-class Midwestern life. More importantly, the nomadic life of the Mongols was a more romantic version of my own childhood odyssey through a series

of small towns by moving van. The professor's story fused the idea of adventure, horseflesh, and my own life. I was mostly vegetarian, but I became perhaps the only student in Ann Arbor with an active desire to eat a horse.

In a pleasant accident, I went on to Mongolia as a Peace Corps Volunteer and arrived with a rucksack appropriately full of romantic ideas. Typically, the experience of volunteering promptly failed to cooperate with my expectations. I began my service in Khongor, rare among Mongolian towns because its fortunes are more apparently tied to settled agricultural and industrial labor than they are to herding. Surrounded by wheat and canola fields, Khongor drizzled realism on my romantic ideas.

My host family lived at the edge of town. They had jobs in town and

raised root vegetables. They had no horses of their own, only a few cows that required a minimum of wrangling. They did not plunder or conquer, but they did make the best yogurt I have ever tasted. We ate mutton and noodles, fried goat pies, and more dairy than I had seen since I learned to walk. It was hearty food that I was both grateful to share and quietly disappointed to see was not the exotic meat I had imagined. The better part of me appreciated the typically grey, beige and white food of Mongolia. Another part of me daydreamed about hummus and Cheez-It crackers. Another part I tried to ignore still wanted the red flesh and yellow fat of horsemeat.

By the end of the summer I spent with them, the desire to eat horse dulled until I did not even notice the first time I ate horse. While I

A horse skull on the banks of the Khataa River in northern Mongolia's Darkhan-Uul province. Bleached bones are a common sight in Mongolia as herd animals and working horses are slaughtered, freeze, or, more rarely, die from natural causes.



Photo from Mongolia 06-09



Rob Stevens/Mongolia 06-09

**Boldoo, a herder from the village of Battsengel in Arkhangai province, pulls alongside a Mitsubishi. Horseback is still a major mode of transport in the countryside, and horses even make their way onto busy streets in the capital or into the parking lot of Chinggis Khaan International Airport.**

chewed a bit of dinner, one of the children pointed at my bowl and the rest galloped around the living room: horse. Through that very mundane granting of a private wish, I stopped wanting Mongolia to give me horse and started to take what it gave me.

Part of what it gave me, even living with a family in town, was a reverence for the living animal, a reverence that does not preclude the possibility of stir-fry. Even from the window of our house I could see that Mongolian horses work. Some are raised for racing, some for meat and milk. Horses depend upon their herders for forage, and the herders depend upon them to produce milk, meat, wool, and cashmere that still prop up Mongolia's diet and economy. Over years of co-dependence, the people and their mounts have developed a deep mutual respect that is even stronger for its roots in necessity—we may love dogs, but Mongolians still need their horses, and they love them accordingly.

When I went to my permanent placement in the desert, a woman named Oyunchimeg took over my cultural and culinary education—she cooked, I obediently peeled potatoes. Through her, though, I was able to request my own food from herders in the countryside. I asked for horse, and she called me ridiculous.

*Our people, she told me, do eat horse, but we prefer to eat mutton or beef. Horse is for the winter.*

*But why?* I asked.  
*Because the meat is oily. It's bad for your stomach in the summer.*

Like the linguistic child I was, I continued asking why until we reached the limits of Oyunchimeg's significant patience. Then she gave me the best and simplest explanation. Because, she said, we do.

Like so much else about volunteering, that bit of common sense did not make immediate sense, and it certainly did not translate back home. I

shared my diet by email and return emails brought indignation and the electronic equivalent of retching. An ex-girlfriend from Kentucky who I hadn't heard from in months scolded me. My sister-in-law, whose family raises horses in Missouri, suggested—perhaps in jest—that she would stop speaking to me if I kept it up. From where I sat, I was being responsible and culturally appropriate, but, looking across the Pacific, I was being provocative at best and cruel at worst.

[For Americans, living horses, like dogs and cats, attract a significance and fondness that elevates them into the sparsely populated pantheon of exceptional, inedible animals. Other animals don't make the cut—we have no cowboy ballads about loyal sheep; we don't feed sugar cubes to turkeys or meaningfully stroke the necks of chickens, we don't develop attachments to oysters or teach shrimp to nuzzle our faces.]

*Because* is not a good enough a reason for *my people* to eat horse. Even to avid meat-eaters, horses in the United States are usually more than the sum of their potentially delicious parts. For all my frustration with Oyunchimeg, the reasons we don't eat horse—big eyes, sleekness, perceived loyalty, and the national myth of how they helped us “win” the West—can be reduced to *because we don't*.

Ultimately, we eat what we eat *because we do*, because we learned

to, and because the people around us ate it and still do. When I took my desire to eat a horse to Mongolia, I was playing the same part as my family. Mongolia, thankfully, was amenable to horse-eating, but I had taken one way of seeing the world and, for an embarrassingly long time, applied it to my new home. Before Mongolia, horse was a priority and a symbol. For Mongolians, horse is a somewhat unexciting seasonal food, as exciting as rhubarb and delicious as fruitcake. For the time I was there, horse became exactly what it needed to be—nothing special.

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