

GENERAL

# ON THE IMPRACTICALITY OF A CHEESEBURGER.

DECEMBER 3, 2011 WALDO JAQUITH 163 COMMENTS

A few years ago, I decided that it would be interesting to make a cheeseburger from scratch. Not just regular “from scratch,” but *really* from scratch.

Like, I’d make the buns, I’d make the mustard, I’d grow the tomatoes, I’d grow the lettuce, I’d grow the onion, I’d grind the beef, make the cheese, etc.

If you came here having been told that this is an article about how the cheeseburger was “impossible” until recently, please note that it is not. It is about how the cheeseburger as we know it today was an *impractical* food until relatively recently. (Ref: the title.) A time-traveler with unlimited resources could probably pull it off. –WJ

It didn’t happen that summer, by the following summer, my wife and I had [built a new house](#), started raising chickens, and established a pretty good-sized garden. I realized that my prior plan hadn’t been ambitious enough—that wasn’t *really* from scratch. In fact, to make the buns, I’d need to grind my own wheat, collect my own eggs, and make my own butter. And I’d really need to raise the cow myself (or sheep, and make lamb burgers), mine or extract from seawater my own salt, grow my own mustard plant, etc. This past summer, revisiting the idea, I realized yet again that I was insufficiently ambitious. I’d really need to plant and harvest the wheat, raise a cow to produce the milk for the butter, raise another cow to slaughter for its [rennet](#) to make the cheese, and personally slaughter and process the cow or sheep. At this point I was thinking that this might all add up to an interesting book, and started to consider seriously the undertaking.

Further reflection revealed that it’s quite impractical—nearly impossible—to make a cheeseburger from scratch. [Tomatoes are in season in the late summer.](#) [Lettuce is in season in spring and fall.](#) [Large mammals are slaughtered in early winter.](#) The process of making such a burger would take nearly a year, and would inherently involve omitting some core cheeseburger ingredients. It would be wildly expensive—requiring a trio of cows—and demand

many acres of land. There's just no sense in it.

A cheeseburger cannot exist outside of a highly developed, post-agrarian society. It requires a complex interaction between a handful of vendors—in all likelihood, a couple of dozen—and the ability to ship ingredients vast distances while keeping them fresh. The cheeseburger couldn't have existed until nearly a century ago as, indeed, [it did not](#).

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The weekend before Thanksgiving, my wife and I had some friends and family members over to the house to slaughter turkeys. We'd raised eight of them from poults, letting them free range around our land for most of their lives, and their time had come. It took the bulk of the day to slit their throats, bleed them out, pluck them, gut them, and put them on ice. Everybody got to take home a turkey that, by all accounts, was delicious. (Nearly everybody has already asked us to do this again next year.) Accompanied by cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and apple pie, it was a meal that could have been produced almost entirely at our home (and very nearly was). There was no mining of salt, of course, but it proved to be a meal that made sense for the place and the time. It's really the only such ritual meal in the U.S. for which that's true.

The Pilgrims established this standard, although in their case they probably had their meal in early October. [The Thanksgiving menu at Plymouth Plantation](#) was described by William Bradford:

*They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercising in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want; and now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides*

*waterfowl there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion.*

There's some fundamental good in eating honestly, I think. Of knowing where your food comes from—raising it yourself, when you can—and trying to eat foods that could theoretically have existed a century ago. But you can't take that but so far, or else the whole thing breaks down. As Carl Sagan wrote in *Cosmos*, "If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe."