

Defending Beef: A review



I recently had the opportunity to interview Nicolette Hahn Niman about the newly-revised and expanded edition of her 2014 book *Defending Beef: The Ecological and Nutritional Case for Meat*.

The *LA Times* review says “Nicolette Hahn Niman sets out to debunk just about everything you think you know . . . She’s not trying to change your mind; she’s trying to save your world.”

There are lots of misconceptions about meat, especially beef. Many are convinced:

- Meat causes heart disease
- Meat causes cancer
- Meat production is harmful to the environment
- Livestock contribute significantly to global warming
- Meat substitutes are healthier and better for the planet

I can’t tell you how often I hear, when taking a diet history on a new patient, the constant refrain: “I try to avoid red meat as much as possible.” As if that were a virtue.

The book is meticulously researched. As an environmental lawyer, Hahn Niman started out as a committed vegetarian and was tasked by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to spearhead a national campaign against meat industry pollution. She learned that the accepted narrative against meat consumption was actually far more nuanced. In the process, she ended up accepting a marriage proposal from a rancher—yes, *that* Niman, founder of one of America's leading producers of natural meat, Niman Ranch.

The book essentially has two parts. The first section tackles the assertion that meat production is inherently bad for the environment. The second addresses health concerns about meat consumption.

As to claims that livestock production devastates ecosystems and that bovine burps unleash methane that hasten global warming, Hahn Niman asserts "It's not the cow—it's the *how*." By that she means that sustainable agricultural practices—not modern industrialized farms—actually help the environment and contribute little to the modern burden of greenhouse gases.

Nevertheless, foes of meat have weaponized environmental concerns to buttress their argument that meat is bad. They have found willing enablers in powerful agribusiness conglomerates and Big Food entities who are happy to transform cheap soy, wheat and corn crops into ultra-processed consumables.

When it comes to health, it's commonly acknowledged that the American diet is responsible for our pandemic of degenerative diseases. Often, its depredations are ascribed to our overconsumption of animal products. But, as Hahn Niman points out, that's far from conclusive.

In the mythos of advocates of a "plant-based diet", our ancestors lived an agrarian life, consuming meat sparingly on small family farms. But in fact, meat consumption has declined since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, as has dairy intake.

Moreover, there's been a proliferation of faux meat and dairy products, as well as low-fat alternatives. We're told by government entities and the American Heart Association to substitute vegetable oils for saturated fat and to eat lean meats, only in moderation, while emphasizing fish and skinless chicken. The new mantra is to consume plenty of whole grains and vegetable protein.

The net result has been catastrophic. Obesity rates, even among the very young, are soaring, as is the incidence of premature degenerative diseases.

Hahn Niman points out the flaws in nutrition research that has demonized meat. Among those is the "healthy user fallacy", meaning the tendency for people who claim to avoid meat in diet surveys to have overall healthier lifestyles. As a rule, people who eat burgers, hot dogs and cold cuts indiscriminately may be less scrupulous about other aspects of their diet, like including fresh produce or overconsuming empty calories; they may exercise less, take fewer supplements, and live in less healthy environments or have risky occupational exposures.

Lumped together in studies with individuals who consume a meat-rich Standard American Diet (SAD) are folks like me, a consumer of grass-fed meats, careful about refined carbs, and scrupulous about eating multiple servings of fresh, organic produce, while exercising and consuming supplements. How are we to infer risk of meat consumption from flawed research that doesn't reflect our lifestyles?

Despite the limitations of nutrition research, Hahn Niman highlights the latest studies that show no additional health risks from consumption of *unprocessed* red

meats, including beef, pork and lamb.

Moreover, current research has exonerated dietary cholesterol and saturated fats as drivers of heart disease and stroke. You'll find a comprehensive and compelling critique of the now-obsolete animal fat/heart disease hypothesis in **Defending Beef**.

Even harder to dispel is the popular notion that meat consumption prompts cancer. Here again, most studies don't discriminate between chemical-laden processed meats and organic or grass-fed alternatives. Hahn Niman points out that the few that do fail to establish a link between consumption of unadulterated meat and cancer risk.

Of faux meats, Hahn Niman writes, they are definitely not the answer: *"They won't make us healthier and they won't make us happier. They will only further entrench the industrialized food system that is at the core of our environmental and human woes."* While billed as eco-friendly, their resource-heavy production methods take a toll on the planet's ecology, and their impact on human health remains a wild-card.

Nor is everything right with meat production in the US, Hahn Niman admits:

"Stated succinctly, problems fall into the following categories: the way cattle are managed on the land; substances they are fed; hormones and other drugs used to stimulate growth; polluting practices; wasted resources; long-distance transport of live animals; and animal handling and slaughter."

Instead, she proposes, "Regenerative farming with livestock that looks like nature and produces nutrient-rich food, is the answer."

In a sober, fully scientific and methodical way, Hahn Niman, tackles these issues and more. I highly recommend her newly-updated book to those who would like to obtain a balanced view of the diet wars, as well as those concerned for the environment.