Mr. Cutlets
196 pp. Illustrations. $12.95 (paper)

It’s pretty much a truism that most mass-market guidebooks reduce the experience of travel to toddler-safe levels, eliminating the big payoffs encountered occasionally when straying off the beaten path. The best guidebooks are very personal, and the very best so opinionated that it quickly becomes clear that the author is some kind of crank. New York, a city which prizes its cranks as Vienna prizes its musicians, absolutely deserves Mr. Cutlets’s Meat Me in Manhattan, a guide, as might be surmised, to the city’s meat opportunities.

Striking a posture something along the lines of A.J. Liebling as reinvented by Charles Dickens, Mr. Cutlets posits himself as some kind of carnivorous Ranger Rick leading his young charges on a field trip through the city reconfigured as a Wonderland of Meat, as if God and Robert Moses had been competitors in some advanced Spam sculpture contest. Mr. Cutlets paints himself as a hefty gourmand, steering his belly gingerly through Manhattan’s clogged arteries as he ambles between palaces of flesh in search of his next meaty thrill. He degusts, he disparages, he extols, all in an entertainingly florid faux-Victorian prose. He’s an engaging writer, and even when one doesn’t agree with him, his position is disarmingly argued that it’s hard to mount more than a smile in resistance.

The book is as peripatetic as the author himself seems to be, winding its way through individual restaurant reviews, gruff manifestos on Mr. Cutlets–approved approaches to particular animals and particular cuts thereof, disquisitions (a Mr. Cutlets word if ever there was one) on the nature of meat itself, proposed itineraries for the appreciation of meats like pork and goat, and profiles of the men and women who grease the runners of the city’s meat world—the powerful beef buyer from Peter Luger’s Steakhouse and sundry restaurateurs, chefs, and prominent butchers. His respect for these individuals—and his fondness for their handiwork—positively irradiates the book.

As a New Yorker (for this is what we do), I take exception to some of his assertions and tut at some of his omissions, but he’s largely on the money. His choices are Downtown-oriented, which is reasonable, given his fondness for the well-prepared offcut and the traditional location of poorer ethnic groups and their accompanying cuisines (which celebrate the offcut) in the city’s lower reaches, as well as the availability of cheap space that has made the area attractive to high-end restaurateurs. I’d be interested in hearing more fully his opinions about the gradual evolution of Manhattan’s Lower West Side meatpacking district into a cobble-stoned network of see-and-be-seen celeb-chef eateries, something that’s largely happened since the preparation of his book.

I’m bewildered, though, by a leitmotiv in the book, alarming each time it crops up: Mr. Cutlets has a fondness for American cheese. I’m not talking a weakness for Humboldt Fog, or a soft spot for Winchester Farms Aged Gouda. I’m talking a full-on, almost fawning admiration for bright orange squares of processed dairy product, the stuff sometimes sold—like condoms or biohazard suits—in individual cellophane-wrapped packages for personal use. Mr. Cutlets cites it as a sine qua non in the perfect cheeseburger and, encountering it in a coffee shop grilled-cheese-and-bacon, grows misty-eyed as he rhapsodizes about “tangerine-colored square cheese on white bread, liberally margarined.” It’s damn peculiar! But it’s New York! I give him mad props for striking his pose!

His omissions are minor, and purely subjective: if you know your New York City meat, you’ll doubtless have a beat or two of your own. Here’s mine: Mr. Cutlets has overlooked what I consider two of the best steaks in Manhattan, the grilled New York strip with beer-battered onion rings and a sublime mustard and bone marrow custard served by Alfred Portale at the Gotham Bar and Grill and the superb 60 Second–Seared Dry-Aged Sirloin, cooked on one side only and served with frisée salad and a toasted round of golden brioche cradling the yolk of an Aurucana egg, by chef Marco Moreira at Tocqueville. These are omissions I am happy to correct, omissions that I hope to bring to Mr. Cutlet’s attention by way of thank you.

—Jonathan Hayes, New York, NY