“But with the male domestic fowl, that has been fed on hemp seeds and oil of ‘?* (۝نْ), and on the butter of olive, [no fowl can stand the contest].—First, on the day it is killed one [must] chase and frighten it, and [then] must hang up [its] (foot), and then on the second day must hang it by the neck, and roast it on a spit.”¹

So it is said in a sixth-century Middle Persian manual of accepted gourmet opinions. It sounds peculiar to us, this idea of chasing and frightening a rooster—no matter how well fattened—before slaughtering. We know that if an animal is stressed by fear or violent exercise, its meat will become tough.

The reason is as follows: When the animal is killed without stress, the cells continue to use up their fuel, but since no fresh oxygen is available, its lactic acid byproduct can’t be broken down. However, if the animal is killed after being stressed, more oxygen is available and some of the lactic acid does get broken down.

This makes the meat seem firmer and drier (“tougher”), since the proteins are better able to hang on to their water in this less acid environment and don’t ooze as much. This also makes the meat spoil faster. (In the Middle East the latter consideration ordinarily doesn’t have much weight, because slaughtered animals are not typically hung but slaughtered, butchered, and cooked the same day. The Persian book is unusual in saying to hang the bird overnight.)

“Another effect of stressing,” the food science writer Harold McGee points out, “would be to speed the onset of rigor mortis, which comes when the muscle runs out of fuel and the contractile proteins lock into place, and then its passing as muscle enzymes begin to break the proteins down.” This process happens faster at higher temperatures, McGee adds, so (depending on the climate and animal and timing) stressing might help speed the meat through rigor before cooking. He speculates that this might compensate somewhat for the lack of hanging.

Medieval Baghdad adopted Persian court customs wholesale, the idea of frightening your dinner included. The onager or wild ass had been a favorite game meat of the pre-Islamic kings of Iran, and in a tenth-century cookbook based on the personal recipe collections of the caliphs and their circle, the following medical information is included: “All that you eat of wild (ass) meat after exhaustion and pursuit [al-kadd wal-tard] is faster to digest and lighter in the stomach, and more beneficial, and more praised of consequence.”² This does not necessarily refer to the hunt; the finest onager meat was held to come from animals that had been fattened in captivity.

What’s going on here? M.M. Ahsan points out that the fear and exhaustion of the hunt was believed to make meat more “heating,” and “heating” food digests more quickly.³ But according to medieval medical doctrine, this would also make the meat positively dangerous to eat, and one would expect that passage to mention this. Meat was already a “heating” food, and stressed meat would unbalance the humors unless one was suffering from a “cold” illness or balanced it with “cooling” ingredients such as lettuce, sweetbreads, coriander, and camphor.

I happen to doubt that medieval people governed their diet by medical theory. Modern Americans are known for paying avid attention to dietary theories, but we still consume great quantities of meat, dairy products, and animal fats. Many of us call ourselves vegetarians, but a recent study showed that we tend to have idiosyncratic definitions of vegetarianism that permit us to eat meat whenever we feel like it. I suspect that medieval people were much the same: some followed their doctors’ recommendations all the same; some followed their doctors’ recommendations all the time, the rest got religion about it when they were sick, and formal dinners often made a great show of being “dietarily correct.”

Some contexts make it clear that stressed meat was considered positively enjoyable. The same passage where the tenth-century Baghdad cookbook recommends eating exhausted onager quotes a poem in which the scribe Mahmud b. al-Hasan invites a friend to come enjoy a meal of fatted kid and a Persian dish of stewed sliced meat: “a
kushtābiyya of a gazelle meat that the hunting birds [jawārih] brought you after exhausting it.”

In hunting, that favorite diversion of aristocrats, animals are necessarily stressed before being killed, and it may be noteworthy that the above references to exhausting animals all come from sources in or near royal courts, whether of pre-Islamic Persia or the Baghdad of the caliphs. In the six later medieval Arab cookbooks, which were written by middle-class scribes, there is only one mention of stressing before slaughter. Perhaps the particular qualities of meat obtained in the hunt, like the “gaminess” of wild venison, were enjoyed simply because they were familiar in these circles.

Above: Bahram Gur Hunting with Azada. From the Shahnama (Book of Kings), 1352.

**NOTES**

1. Husrav i kavštān u rētk ā [the Pahlavi text King Husrav and His Boy], Janshedji Maneckji Umvala, trans. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1921), 19. I have amended the translation. Umvala says to hang the rooster’s “trunk,” but the Persian text has pādh, “foot.”

