

# Bone Boil

## Nourishing Traditions, *the cookbook and the culture*

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BONES COST \$1.29/POUND at New Seasons Market, and you only need 7 pounds — plus or minus optional calf’s foot — to make bone broth à la *Nourishing Traditions*. On the advice of *N.T.*’s author, Sally Fallon, I asked my butcher for beef knuckles and meaty ribs (much more legitimate than pointing at pre-portioned pieces of chicken), and was directed to the pet food aisle. In the two years since vegetarianism and I officially parted ways, I’ve eaten some weird food — unidentifiable seafood medleys and mysteriously sourced chicken tacos; freshly slaughtered lamb and freshly roadkilled squirrel; steak carpaccio and steak tartare; a cheeseburger that was sandwiched between two grilled cheeses — but I had never eaten something intended for a dog. The bones were neatly packed in plastic, stickered by weight and price, and inside of a fridge labeled “raw pet.”

Two days later (you can simmer your broth as long as 72 hours, or as little as 12), I had achieved the promised pot of “rather repulsive brown liquid containing globs of gelatinous and fatty material.” I poked the surface with my wooden spoon. The liquid had reduced by half and was the color of gravy. Fallon warns that your broth, at this point, “doesn’t even smell particularly good,” so, always one for a good olfactory challenge (seriously, ask me to smell anything), I stuck my face into the pot. My glasses fogged, but I went in deeper. I closed my eyes. It smelled like velvet. Velvet, iron, and beef.

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There are no bones on the cover of *Nourishing Traditions*, the manifesto/cookbook published to apparent controversy in 1999, republished in 2001, and fairly described by Amazon.com reviewers as “anti-vegetarian,” “not well referenced,” “exhaustively researched,” “near missionary in its fervor,” and “interesting.” Instead of bones or blood, there are bushels of wheat. There are cheerful yellow gourds, and there are smiling, vaguely ethnic people, and there are fish that look happy even though they are dead. There is a topless woman, but she’s topless in a *National Geographic* kind of way, and the whole thing appears to have been done

with colored pencil, maybe shaded in MS Paint. Fans of flashy memoirs like Gabrielle Hamilton’s *Blood, Bones & Butter*, drinkers of bacon-infused vodka — if Fallon had published her book today, these would have been her people. But meat wasn’t sexy yet in 1999, and *Nourishing Traditions* is about as hot as your grandmother’s gazpacho.

That said, the diet prescribed by *Nourishing Traditions* would be familiar to any reader of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and contemporary nutritionists pay compulsory homage to the book’s sections on the benefits of whole grains and the evils of sugar. *Nourishing Traditions* in a (presoaked) nutshell: Don’t eat genetically engineered foods full of artificial ingredients; do eat organic whole foods, especially fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Eat ethically raised animals — fat and all. So far, so good.

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Fallon suggests that any vegetarians without debilitating health problems are sneaking steaks on the sly.

But, like most appealing militants, Fallon is just a touch too black and white for mainstream consumption. Take, for example, a 2009 interview on Jimmy Moore’s *Living Low-Carb Show*, when she explained that our national fear of fat is “the result of a deliberate campaign [by the vegetable oil industry] that started in the 1950s after the second world war.” Consider her stance on vegetable oil itself, which she fingers as a major cause of modern health problems ranging from sexual dysfunction and sterility to obesity, diabetes, and cancer. And finally, consider her assertion that human beings must, without exception, eat animals.

According to Fallon, high mortality rates in southern India are the inevitable product of Hindu vegetarianism, and Peruvians are short (the height of your average Pygmy, even) thanks to their dependence on quinoa. Without eating meat, it’s impossible to absorb essential nutrients like Vitamin D, magnesium, copper, iodine, manganese, silicon, sulfur and zinc, which suggests that any vegetarians without

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Of course, Fallon makes me most uncomfortable when she spells out the reason why I myself now eat meat. How many of us new converts to the carnivorous diet haven't said, at some point, "My body wanted it," or "I needed the energy," or even "It just tastes so good"? By invoking our deep-seated suspicions about our own biology — surely if meat were bad, we wouldn't crave it so deeply — and our (well-founded) mistrust of industrialized food, Fallon manages to frame a carnivorous diet as not only acceptable but somehow more ethical than vegetarianism.

"The desire to abstain from animal products," Fallon speculates, "may reflect a longing to return to a former, more perfect state of consciousness that was ours before our souls took embodiment in physical bodies on the material plane." This is, of course, just another way of repeating a line familiar to any former herbivore: Vegetarians think they're better than everyone else.

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Boiled down, *Nourishing Traditions* is based on the findings of Weston Price — an Ohioan dentist who packed up his sharp metal objects, his camera, and his wife, and set out to seek wisdom from primitive people and their teeth. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Prices visited the Loetschental Valley Swiss and the North American Indians; they studied the Melanesians of New Caledonia and lived among the Polynesians of the Pacific Islands, whom Weston greatly admired for their "straight hair, oval features, happy, buoyant dispositions and splendid physiques." What surprised the Prices, but would not surprise anyone today, was that the farther they got from industrialized society, the healthier the people became.

Their research, eventually to be compiled in *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration: A Comparison of Primitive and Modern Diets and Their Effects*, notes that those who enjoyed diets consistent with that of their ancestors — diets that, the world over, were high in vitamins, minerals, and animal fats — had fantastic teeth. People who had been exposed to imported foods, processed grains, and sugar (even for only a single generation) had bad teeth. Price concluded that the rapid decline of modern American health could be blamed almost entirely on our reliance on "modern" food, and that a return to a traditional, animal fat-laden diet would also be a return to good health.

The obvious hole — the cavity, you might say — in Price's logic is that industrialization affects more than food supply;

health, as we understand it today, is more complicated than diet alone. The splendid physiques Price revered may have also been the result of energetic canoe building, or daily foraging, or arduous mountain commutes. It's difficult, if fun, to imagine the Prices participating in a primitive Maori calisthenics ritual that they observed in Australia, in which the entire village joined in a rhythmic dance that benefited "the muscles of the body, particularly those of the

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abdomen." Price, who died in 1948, couldn't have anticipated the caloric needs of the deskbound social media consultant/software engineer/freelance designer of 2011; to be fair, he never explicitly suggested that modern Americans precisely replicate aboriginal diets. It was Fallon who made that final connection, and it was Fallon who, in writing *Nourishing Traditions*, brought his findings to the mainstream.

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Recipe-wise (not to mention aesthetically), *Nourishing Traditions* might have been called "Meat for Vegetarians" — it's *The Moosewood Cookbook*, with beef. The recipes are healthful, easy to execute, and family friendly, which is a nice way of saying "bland." There are pre-planned menus like "Dinner in the Oriental Style" (celery root salad, salmon, and brown rice), "Child's Birthday Party" (carrot salad, buffalo wings, apple slices, and a layered cake), and the confusingly named "New World Dinner" (crab cakes, succotash, and a pecan tart). There are two different recipes for brown rice, and there are many, many casseroles. The sexiest section is "Raw Meat Appetizers," which recommends freezing meat for 14 days to eliminate parasites, and includes an excellent recipe for spicy sirloin, served with crispy peanuts and lime.

But it's bone broth that made the most waves when Sally Fallon first published *Nourishing Traditions*, and, along with her crusade against vegetarianism, it's bone broth that Fallon is best known for today. The broth is Fallon's major concession to the modern world; her acknowledgment that preparing fresh, organic meat on a daily basis involves more



time and money than most families can afford. So, while I knew that making my own stock would be complicated and messy, the kind of project that would ravage my tiny kitchen and leave me with more food than a single person living in a studio apartment could possibly eat, I decided to boil up some bones.

While simmering unwanted meat parts to make stock was, until recently, a no-brainer, homemade broth has largely gone the way of homemade butter and homemade bread — best left to hippies, gourmet chefs, and the French. But according to Fallon’s description, my homemade stock would literally cook itself. It would pump me and my loved ones full of essential nutrients, cost next to nothing, and earn me “a reputation of an excellent cook.” I imagined Sally, looking exactly as she does in her author photo — sensible hairdo, simple makeup, shoulder pads — in a crisp white apron, splitting a chicken breast with a cleaver. I reached into my mental files and recovered some stock imagery of kerchiefed grandmothers, stirring enormous pots. I imagined myself serving hot soup to my future family or tossing a boiled beef knuckle to my future Labrador retriever. My practical concerns were replaced by an exquisite longing.

Which is how I found myself face-deep in a pot of

simmering cow. Sally Fallon says that when we eat animals, “we are accepting, reverently and humbly, the requirement of the earthly body,” but there’s little about opening a sterile can of Swanson broth to remind you that you’re eating another animal. I had a sink full of beef bones, which were rapidly attracting flies in the summer heat, and a bowl full of thick, white, coagulating fat. I had simmered the broth for almost 48 hours, filling my apartment (and my building’s lobby) with the smell of beef stew.

Next, I would strain the vegetables, pour the broth into jars, let the fat rise to the top, and skim it for a final time; but first, I wanted to try it. As I sipped at a spoonful of broth, shimmering with oil, I didn’t feel any sudden surge of energy forcing its way through my veins, and I didn’t feel my cells rallying to fight off incipient cancer. What I did feel was humble — in order to feed myself, I had eaten from a fridge intended for dogs. I detected no quasi-magical powers; on the contrary, the stock steamed, and imbued everything it touched, with the very essence of humble practicality. And with this humility came an utterly unironic sense of connection, reverence even, for my ancestors, and yes, for Sally Fallon. By following their example, I had drawn a rich, nourishing soup from little more than a pile of bones. 