

Is the Impossible Burger the future of meat?



Uncooked Impossible Burger patties

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It felt a little absurd.

I bit into a veggie burger and looked inside to see if there was any pink in the center, as if this meat-less patty had been cooked medium-rare. The texture had me wondering. And, you see, that's the hook of the Impossible Burger — that it “bleeds.”

Now, let's back up a minute.

I'd been hearing about the Impossible Burger for months. It started when a server friend in Portland shared news that a newfangled innovation had landed in her restaurant. Rolled out at select locations around town, it was touted as the next big thing in meatless technology.

And indeed, “technology” is the right word.

While it begins in the soil, the Impossible Burger is very much a product of Silicon Valley. It's the flagship of Impossible Foods, a startup with dreams and expectations as sprawling as its purely digital brethren.

Like so many aspiring unicorns, Impossible Foods deigns to make the world a better place. But unlike, say, Snapchat, Impossible has, if not a clearer path to profitability, then certainly a more tangible chance at shifting behavior for the better.

The arguments for selectively reducing or eliminating meat consumption are, as I see them, three-fold: ethical, environmental and health-based.

The ethics are obvious. Factory



COURTESY IMPOSSIBLE FOODS
A fully assembled Impossible Burger

farming is largely atrocious and obscene. As stand-up comic Kyle Kinane jokes, he's “one Netflix documentary away from becoming a vegetarian.” I'm right there with him: eyes wide shut.

But factory farming's practices have consequences on human health, too, as explored by New York Times columnist (and Yamhill Oregon's own) Nicholas Kristof. “Seventy percent of all antibiotics in the United States go to healthy livestock, according to a careful study by the Union of Concerned Scientists,” Kristof writes, “and that's one reason we're seeing the rise of pathogens that defy antibiotics.”

(As for personal nutrition, when compared to beef the Impossible Burger is kind of a wash; it has similar amounts of saturated fat.)

On the environmental impacts: According to The Guardian, “quit-

ting meat can reduce your carbon footprint significantly more than quitting driving.” Indeed, it takes a lot — water, grain, space — to grow a 2,000 pound beef cow. Along the way, they fart and poop. A lot. Then they're packed and shipped all over the country (and world).

According to Bloomberg, Americans will eat a record amount of meat in 2018 — around 230 pounds per person, more than 50 of which will be beef. So if the Impossible Burger can make a dent in those trends while reducing environmental, ethical and health impacts, good on 'em, as existing veggie burgers don't seem to be effecting the trends.

Really, though, I was overcome by curiosity ... is the Impossible Burger the disruptor it's touted to be? Had science finally cracked the code?

The Impossible Burger's tech

boils down to the extraction of “heme,” short for leghemoglobin, a protein similar to those found in beef. Heme is extracted from soy roots and, through fermentation, supercharged.

Inside an Impossible Burger there's also plenty of wheat and potato proteins, plus a load of coconut oil (which pumps up saturated fats to levels on par with beef).

But it's the heme that's the thing.

According to Wired magazine, “Impossible Foods thinks the essence of a meat lies in a compound called heme, which gives ground beef its color and vaguely metallic taste — thanks to iron in the heme molecule. In blood, heme lives in a protein called hemoglobin; in muscle, it's in myoglobin.”

So, in heme you have your “blood.”

And, just like ground beef, Impossible Burgers are red before cooking.

To some, like my longtime vegan sister (who's also an animal rights lawyer), the quest to mimic meats — making them “bleed” — is absurd. As she told me, innovations like the Impossible Burger “are not for longtime vegetarians. They're for people in transition to a veg diet or trying to eat less meat.”

For that to work, the Impossible Burger has to succeed on two fronts: price and flavor. And right now, they've got a long way to go on price. Impossible Burgers cost more than their beef counterparts. Sometimes a lot more. But like any tech, it's all about scale. (Still, a lot of the less tech-y veggie burgers are more expensive than beef, which

just ... makes me sad for cows.)

Then there's flavor. The Impossible Burger is, by far, the most meat-like substitute I've ever tried, but so much of that has to do with texture.

That's where the Impossible Burger has made the biggest strides. It's less grainy, more fleshy, moist, but short of juicy. Pure flavor-wise, it was reminiscent of a Morningstar breakfast patty — albeit with, again, a far superior texture.

In an effort to isolate the Impossible Burger's essentials from its preparations and accoutrements, I tried it at two different Portland locations. (Here's hoping a restaurant or two in Astoria picks it up soon.)

On my tasting trips I brought along a load of friends, including a restaurateur, a longtime server at one of Portland's most celebrated vegetarian restaurants, a vegetarian and carnivores who were every bit as curious as I was.

Responses varied from “this is the best veggie burger I've ever had” to “this tastes like a cheap kid's hamburger; I bet my daughter wouldn't know the difference.” They coalesced, however, around price: they weren't prepared to pay a premium. Indeed, scale must come. Impossible Burgers need to get cheaper.

Finally, about the “blood.”

When I peered inside my Impossible Burgers searching for pink, sadly I found none. While I know a “medium-rare,” “bleeding” Impossible Burger is possible, mine were — as so many regular burgers are — overcooked.

Some things never change. 