

D R. T O M O R R O W ™

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LESSONS FROM THE FUTURE ™

NEW DOMESTIC ANIMALS COMING?

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While relaxing beside the barbecue in your back yard, you may sit back and wonder why, with 220 kinds of large animals in the world, only 10 percent have been domesticated to provide food for man? And, almost none since the start of the industrial age.

That may be about to change. Of the more than 200 remaining large herbivorous animals, the best prospect, according to some food scientists, is the Indian nilgai (means "blue cattle" in Hindi), the largest antelope in Asia. It appears to have nothing but pluses over other animals domesticated mainly by accident over the millennia.

The nilgai produces less than three percent fat compared to 12 percent in beef. One-third less than chicken, and less than the Axis deer now found on 10 percent of New Zealand farms and increasingly appearing on deer farms in western Canada. The calorie count in nilgai steak is one-quarter that of beef and two-thirds that of chicken.

Why isn't the nilgai everywhere? Fate ordained that it would evolve, as did most domesticated animals except the deer, in Asia. In India, Hindu religious beliefs classify the nilgai as cattle and thus sacred. Unimpressive as a trophy animal, the nilgai has been able to maintain a "wild" population of 14,000 in the semi-arid northwestern states of Rajasthan and Haryana. A herd of about 15,000 nilgai roam the range in Texas, descendants of a few zoo animals introduced just prior to World War II. Scientific studies show the American nilgai has an abundance of the right qualities for domestication.

For a farmer, the greatest advantage is the nilgai is the only bovid to regularly give birth to twins, which permits rapid increase in herd size. A nilgai farmer can produce twice the offspring as a farmer raising red deer which rarely produce twins. Both grow very quickly on summer grass to produce lean and healthy venison. Adult nilgai bulls, which weigh up to 280 kilograms (cows 180 kilograms) contain only 0.8 percent fat (commercial beef has 20 percent) females 5.2 percent.

Nilgai farming has other advantages. Males mate with any cow they come across during a three-month mating period. They also waste no time in the process. They have "evolved socially" to the point that they do not defend any particular piece of ground. They dominate only a roving territory of a few hundred square metres which is continually changing. Nilgai males, unlike other bovids which fight by pushing horns, merely entwine necks and test their strength by trying to wrestle the opponent to the ground. No researchers can explain this relaxed, laid back attitude, so unlike most wild animals, and their apparent methods of chemical

communication, are little understood.

With modern advances in genetic manipulation and because the nilgai already has many qualities much in demand, this healthier, leaner meat, which Texan taste panels rate as "tender and tasty" as red deer venison, will probably turn up on supermarket counters in four or five years. It could be the steak for all seasonings.

Graph below shows the relative fat and calorie content of nilgai, other beef, deer and chicken.

