

## “Of Striped Food and Polar Bears”

Dinty W. Moore

I met my first zebra the summer I worked at the Erie Zoo as a fill-in zookeeper. My duties included chopping apples and carrots for the elephant breakfast one week, thawing foul-smelling slabs of mystery meat for the lions a week later, and on the third week, throwing frozen mackerel across a wide moat to a pair of jaded polar bears. My assignment shifted according to which of the regular zookeeping staff was taking vacation.

In mid-July, my supervisor assigned me “up the hill, with the hoof stock,” and I was absolutely delighted. My new charge included caring for the small zebra family, a group that had long fascinated me from afar. The alternating white and black stripes made the zebras seem almost magical, an animal more from the Land of Oz than from Africa.

10 I had seen birds with outrageous plumage, of course—the zoo had three peacocks, five flamingos, exotic parrots—and I owned a small home aquarium with various tropical fish sporting peculiar patterns, but such distinctive markings are rare in four-legged land animals. I just knew that such a visually striking creature would be fascinating in close quarters.

And so Monday came, and I finally spent some time caring for the boldly banded mammal of my imagination. The zebras, it turned out, each and every one of them, were obstinate, smelly, and deadly dull. Perhaps the dullest animals in the zoo.

The zoo had two world-weary horses—retired Clydesdales—but they, at least, would wander to the fence out of curiosity when I approached, and if I fed them a handful of grass and weeds would flash their eyelashes in what seemed like gratitude. We had a hundred-year-old turtle  
20 that slept most of the day, but when he did wake up he seemed wise and venerable, and the beak he used to chew his lettuce was fascinatingly prehistoric.

But the zebras?

No personality whatsoever. They just chewed, and stood there.

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I *ate* my first zebra one summer evening just after I downed a pint of Bonnie Birdie ale in the Thistle Street Bar, in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Specifically, I had a zebra burger.

I was in a foreign land, understand—not quite as foreign as Botswana, perhaps, where zebras can be found roaming the spacious grasslands, in herds sometimes numbering in the  
30 thousands, but foreign enough. I had already tried some Scottish foods quite alien to my tongue: stargazy pie, blood pudding, neeps and tatties, cullen skink. What is travel good for if not new experiences?

So when I saw the shop just off Queen Street advertising zebra burgers, I checked my stomach sensors for signs of hunger, and what I heard back was a rumbling voice that seemed to say, *Try it out, old man.*

I did, and, to be honest, I rather liked it.

The zebra burger offered a bit more chew and texture than the common American beef hamburger. Think of good steak, ground and mixed fifty-fifty with extremely lean pork. There was, in addition, more flavor than the American standard, a rich juiciness reminiscent of roast  
40 beef *au jus*. And a decidedly sweet aftertaste: an unexpected second wave of flavor.

I didn't need a drop of ketchup.

And that was that.

But it has been a few months now since I've returned, and on those occasions when I mention my unusual burger experience to friends, the response usually goes like this:

"You ate *what?*"

Often, the voice will rise with each syllable, as if perhaps I had sneaked onto the stage during a production of *The Lion King* and dragged my prey into the wings while children screamed, fainted, and ran madly up the aisles.

"Zebra? Really?"

50 The look in my friends' eyes is not one of admiration. Clearly, in the minds of many, I have crossed a line.

So, I ask myself, what did I eat, exactly?

A zebra is of the horse family, a close cousin to the wild ass. Zebras wander vast plains eating grass, much like the domestic cow. Zebras are hard to domesticate and are not commonly kept as pets. Pigs are far smarter, if that's our criterion.

But the zebra has stripes. Stripes seem exotic. Exotic reminds us of rhinoceros horn and panda bear, and we make a certain leap in our minds.

To endangered species.

Smuggling rings.

60 The truth, however, is that the zebra meat sold for human consumption in the United Kingdom is farm-raised, like beef cattle, much of it right there in the UK. Zebra herds—I'm speaking of the plains zebra here; there are a few rarer varieties—are for the most part doing just fine in their native African terrain. The global demand is very small, and fully sustainable.

So did I actually cross a line? Or just a stripe?

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To be fully forthcoming, let me confess this: I'm a bit ambivalent about eating creatures at all. We meat-eaters have learned too much about factory farms and animal consciousness, in my opinion, to remain blissfully naive about our choices.

70 I still eat meat and fish because after a half-century of conditioning I find it too hard a habit to break. Put me on ethical-eating trial—challenge me to justify my decision—and you can expect

stammering, stuttering, apology, and occasional weak attempts at self-justification. Clearly, my middle initial, W., does not stand for willpower.

But this is not about the decision to eat meat. It is about the exotic.

Until recently *exotic* simply meant that something—a food, an animal, a shrub—came from another country. Once trade routes were opened, wealthy Europeans could not get enough of the interesting other, whether that meant a taxidermy giraffe or a live human being marched into the French court to represent “the noble savage.” The plains zebra is exotic in Scotland, in other words, but not in Zimbabwe. If eating the exotic is a sin against nature, then you are as guilty when you put a banana on your granola as I was eating zebra just after downing that  
80 Scottish pint.

All of this, of course, is such a fortunate dilemma for our species.

Dietary choices used to be simple: We ate what was given us by geography. If we lived in the far, frigid north, we learned to savor seal meat. If we lived in Montana, there were bison running by the thousands over the plains. The Norwegians hunted reindeer. We needed protein to live another day, and so we ate the protein that was available.

Now we can overnight live lobsters from Maine, fresh shrimp from the Gulf, grass-fed beef from Argentina. We might heighten the interest with a little French gruyère, accompanied by a rare Washington State pinot noir.

90 We eat like kings, and like kings, we are often tempted to colonize the planet.

There are clearly downsides, dangers, and excesses to be found in this new world dinner order, but it is not as simple as just going back to the way it was, at least not for those of us living in urban America. If we simply eat what protein is available, we had better grow fond of alley cat and pigeon.

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Those polar bears I mentioned in my opening, the ones who waited for the frozen mackerel I would toss across the moat, tried more than once to kill me. When you approached their enclosure from the back, where the public didn’t go, there was a steel door, and behind the steel door were bars. When I would go back to hose down the concrete “den” these polar bears  
100 retreated to when the heat or crowds became too much for them, I would open that steel door and would then quickly jump back three paces, because more often than not, within a split second a massive yellow-white paw would slip around from the side, where the polar bear was hiding just out of view.

The regular zookeeper, Gus, an old German immigrant ticking off his days to retirement, schooled me on this. “Just ’cause you don’t see him, ’cause you think he’s outside or something, don’t mean he didn’t hear you come in and isn’t waiting to snag you.” Gus would pause here for effect and then add: “He probably can’t pull you through those bars, but do you wanta find out?”

The polar bear ate what was available. Whatever he could get his hands on, so to speak.

110 If a polar bear had been drinking in the Thistle Street Bar with me that evening, I'm pretty sure he would have been up for a zebra burger, just as I was. He would have worried about it a bit less, probably, and would likely have ordered the ostrich burger as well.

Afterward, chances are, the two of us would have stumbled out onto Queen Street, maybe had another pint or two, shared a few laughs.

And then, I feel fairly certain, he would have eaten me.

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120 [www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-143/striped-food-and-polar-bears](http://www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-143/striped-food-and-polar-bears). Accessed 28 June 2019.