

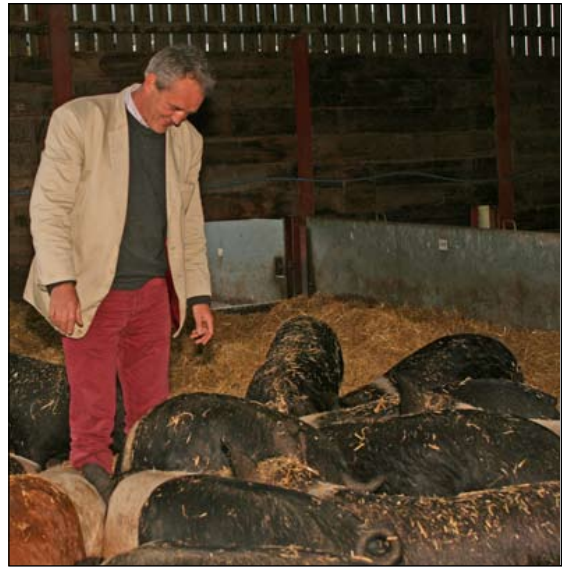
eating

By Tim Finney

Tim Finney gave up an easy life in the BBC to take on the organic meat business at Eastbrook Farm back in 1995. He now spends some glamorous time in pursuit of abattoir excellence within the EU.
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This isn't strictly a restaurant review. I can't remember what I ate – probably a salami sandwich with yellow mustard as a late breakfast – exactly where I was or even the year. What sticks, though, is the stream of people pouring into the slaughterhouse off *Schlachthofstrasse* in this rich industrial north German city. The canteen was their preferred place for breakfast. No Starbucks for them.

The quality and provenance of the ingredients is irrelevant here. And it's not as if the place had any special charm. What's remarkable is that the slaughterhouse was where it was, just another city-centre building, and that the locals treated it as an essential part of their city infrastructure, clearly seeing it as a perfectly normal place to buy and eat food.



If I'd written this 100 years ago I expect people would wonder why. I'm no historian but my guess is slaughterhouses everywhere were located where they best served people, which means close to where people lived and worked. But no longer. Ever tried to visit a slaughterhouse? Ever really seen one or known what it was as you drove past? Ever knocked on the fortress-like gates and asked if you could pop in for a meal? You'd be locked up. Almost without exception, the slaughterhouse has been condemned to the remotest industrial estates, as far from prying eyes as it is possible to be. It would be easier to break into a prison.

There's something wrong here, and it's a wrong that just keeps getting worse as pressures push wider the 'distance' between the meat and its eaters.

A slaughterhouse
Schlachthofstrasse
 A city in
 Northern Germany

I understand that people, given a choice, avoid mess and smell and inconvenience. In the world of meat and animals and eating, there's lots of smell and mess. But without the smell and mess, can we understand what's really happening? This anaesthetised life seems so simple. Someone else does the killing, somewhere else, and someone else does the clearing up, thank God. But are you happy to eat what comes out of this process? And even happier when the chicken is even cheaper than last week or beef mince is on BOGOF?

My German experience wasn't perfect and German slaughterhouse operators are themselves under pressure from their urban authorities to get the hell out of town – shamefully, most have. What it brought home to me, though, is that in a more rational world, we would be asking the slaughterhouses to come into town, please. They would have windows, too, so people could see into them. We would naturally use them to feed us directly, either from their canteens, restaurants or butchers' shops; we would be proud of our family working in them, providing their neighbours and citizens with good fresh food with low food miles. We would see for ourselves, and smell and hear, what exactly was involved in this far from anaesthetised world, and we would be much better able to decide whether we really wished to eat meat. It's hard to make rational decisions on this when all you've got to go on is a plastic pack, its reddish contents and a label you might not always believe.

As far as I can recall, by the way, breakfast was completely satisfactory, though the service was a little haphazard and some might have found the smell disconcerting. My fellow diners seemed very happy. I'm now working with a superb new UK abattoir and, if I have my way (which is unlikely), it will become one of the best places to eat in the south of England. At the moment it is not and sadly it isn't in a town centre either.

How I rate it

Overall ***

Fairness **

Health *

Animals ***

Environment **

Taste ***

Ambience **

Value for money ****

(maximum five stars)