

Horsemeat, says Raineau, has the same texture as venison. Because horse are muscular animals, their meat is very lean. But efforts to market it as a health food to Americans have failed. Amfran once ran a retail store, but that effort was curtailed. "I don't see a need or a reason why Americans should eat horse meat," Raineau said. "There is plenty of beef here. Our American sales remain a very small side business, 500 pounds a week." (Most American customers, he said, are transplanted Italians.)

USDA Regulation

The slaughter of horses is regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and a USDA inspector is on the premises at Amfran whenever animals are being killed. Raineau describes the regulations as "very strict," and he notes that he also has to cope with even stricter guidelines imposed by the European Economic Community (EEC). To get Italian certification, for instance, Raineau has to certify that the horse has not been treated with any antibiotics in the week preceding slaughter.

There is an understandable concern about drugs in the meat because so many of the slaughtered horses are former race-track contenders. Sharon Sachs, information officer for the USDA in Washington, minimizes the danger. "The standards we apply are similar to those used on cattle," she said. "We use different tests because horses get different diseases and different drugs are used on them. We do surveillance sampling if we have a reason to believe there's a problem (Amfran itself was last cited for a "minor infraction" in 1981) but we inspect every carcass and we have an employee in the plant at all times."

James Harr, a USDA veterinarian, says the agency doesn't bother testing for the steroids and hormones used on race horses because they "have quite a short life." He said the substances don't form a residue and have not proven to be a problem for human consumption.

Esther Noiles, the horse extension officer at the University of Connecticut Agricultural School, agrees. "I'd be surprised if there's a problem with drugs. The race horses that are being slaughtered have generally had physical problems for some time, and so haven't raced recently or been treated for drugs." She added that dealers are required

to certify that the horses they sell aren't under the influence of drugs, but, she said, "It's on their word—no blood testing is done."

Some experts are less sanguine about eating horsemeat. Ernest Finocchio, a Rhode Island-based equine veterinarian and expert on race horse breeding, praised Amfran's operation in an interview with the *Baltimore Sun* but has doubts about eating its meat. "The horses come in from everywhere with no medical record. Would I want to eat this meat?

No way." Gale Eisnitz, a humane investigator specializing in horses with the Washington-based Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS), calls USDA inspections "a joke." The inspectors become friends with the plant personnel—they don't want to rock the boat. And they don't enforce the law."

Transportation Abuses

A bigger controversy concerns the welfare of the horses during transportation (often over long distances) and possible misrepresentation used in acquiring them.

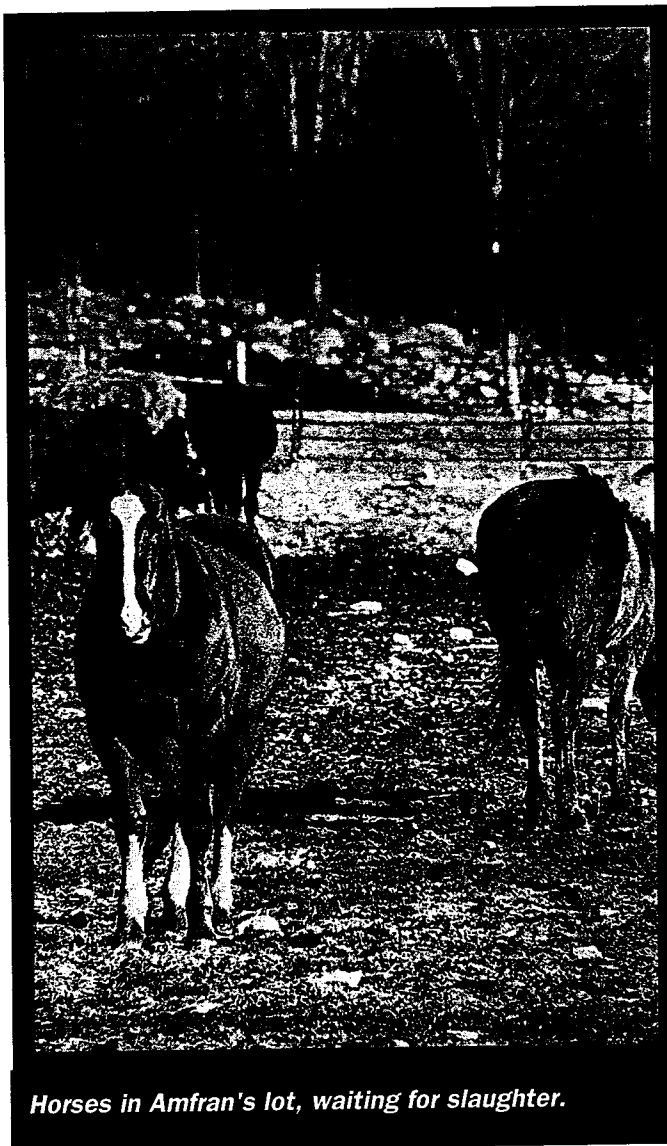
John Adams is an employee of the J.S. Horse Company in Lakeville, Minn., which supplies horses to Amfran and other slaughterhouses. "We buy all over," he said, "mostly at monthly auctions, and we'll pay anything from \$100 to \$5,000 depending on the type of horse. Selling it to the slaughterhouse is sort of a last resort. We'd rather sell them as riding horses. But if they're lame, injured or foundered, there's nothing much else that can be done with them."

J.S. uses large semi-trailers that can hold 45 horses, and regularly makes runs to the east coast and auctions like the one in Agawam, Mass. (see sidebar). Adams claims regula-

tions are stringent and trailers are frequently weighed to see if they exceed state limits.

Unfortunately, not all states have strict regulations, or regulations at all. New York, for instance, considered one of the better states, regulates only trailers designed to carry more than six horses, requiring them to have proper ventilation, an abrasive floor surface, no sharp protrusions in the wall and safe loading ramps. Double-decker trailers are banned. Violators need not be overly concerned, however: the maximum penalty for first offenses is only \$100.

Horse transporters don't get rich off their trade. Don Hartwell, a prominent transporter from Winchester, New Hampshire, recently billed Amfran \$600 for delivering 35 horses from New Hampshire.



Horses in Amfran's lot, waiting for slaughter.