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Meet George Jetson -- and His Test Tube Turkey?

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Imagine Thanksgiving 2050: Your family arrives in their driverless hybrid cars with casseroles brimming with genetically-modified sweet potatoes and corn to go with the Thanksgiving turkey grown in a lab. Maybe the menu also includes recipes from the In Vitro Meat Cookbook, such as colorful meatballs for the kids or steak knitted like scarves.

The cookbook was created by the Next Nature Network to explore how in vitro meat might change our society and our lives. Sound appetizing? Is it even possible?

The first lab-grown hamburger was served up this past summer, and scientists estimate that in vitro meat could be ready for the market in 10 to 20 years. With enough funding, science probably can bring us the meat paint and meat flowers cooked up by the minds of the Next Nature team. That test tube Thanksgiving turkey can't be too far off.

Is it sustainable? Lab meat advocates point out that burgers born and raised in petri dishes don't emit methane or manure, which are major sources of global pollution, and they don't gobble up the water, grain and land needed to raise live animals. And, of course, meat grown from cells and science means fewer animals suffering in factory farms.

All this for the low, low price of about $325,000 per burger. With that price tag, the Koch Brothers are the only ones who could afford to eat it.

The potential methane, land and water use savings of in vitro meat are huge. But will it ever truly be able to meet the growing carnivorous demands of a world with 7 billion people -- or 9 billion people by that hypothetical Thanksgiving dinner of 2050? If it did, would that make lab-grown meat sustainable?

Sustainability has to be defined beyond the basic survival of humans. We all deserve a good quality of life, including other species. A sustainable world is one where other species aren't driven to extinction by overconsumption, and where humans, plants and animals have enough to eat and room to thrive. Factory farming won't get us there. And, as some scientists have argued, the "flashy tech" of in vitro meat won't get us there either.

A more realistic solution is reducing the amount of meat in our diets. Reducing meat consumption means reducing the impact of the livestock industry on other species and the climate -- and doing so without resorting to a Jetsons-inspired diet. As we hurtle toward 9 billion people on the planet -- then 10 billion -- at rocket speeds, we also need to address human population growth to get to a sustainable future.

By eating less meat and making sure everyone has access to education and family planning, we can have healthy families, a healthier planet and healthy food grown outside a lab -- and that's something to be thankful for.

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