

In which the NYT (again) makes my second-city blood boil

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

January 13, 2012

Much has been made of the young A. G. Sulzberger's getting a reporting job at the *New York Times*, which his dad happens to run, and quickly rising to become the paper's Kansas City bureau chief. Of course, the *Times* has never been exactly hesitant to publish [articles that look cluelessly down on the cultural life of U.S. cities with fewer than 8 million residents](#). So I'm not sure I'd [blame nepotism alone](#) for the Sulzberger clunker the paper published this week.

In any case, [it's rough stuff](#). Sulzberger, a vegetarian, says he can't find anything to eat in the Midwest. "It should be stated right up front," he says in the sixth paragraph, "that the Midwest...quickly defies stereotypes." An example of how it does this? Its "superlative decency." (You know, since everybody stereotypes midwesterners as selfish and rude.) But the rumors of rampant carnivorousness? Your intrepid correspondent reports that they are *all true*.

Sulzberger claims to cover the Midwest for the *Times*. But he must mean just the Great Plains states, since the paper has another bureau here in Chicago. Later he uses the term "heartland," which makes a little more sense, and he bemoans the "startling lack of fresh produce" in the region. There's a commodity grain of truth to that; putting up the land for a whole country's addiction to cheap corn and soy will do that to a place. But it's a massive exaggeration, not to mention the fact that the connection between a region's agricultural output and its restaurant menus remains (sadly) quite limited.

If Sulzberger truly covered the whole Midwest, that would take him to Michigan's endless fruit trees. It would also bring him up here to the third largest city in the country, making this statement even more ridiculous:

Those on the coasts have it better. Like many of my brethren, I have instinctively gravitated to cuisine from faraway places where meat is a luxury not all can afford. In New York this meant frequenting terrific Indian, Thai, Ethiopian,

Lebanese and Venezuelan restaurants.

Fellow non-New Yorkers, have you heard about Thai food? There's a Thai place in the 5,000-strong Wisconsin town a couple miles of cornfields over from the 10,000-strong town I grew up in. Every Chicago neighborhood I've lived in has had several decent-or-better ones within walking distance. My church is surrounded by Lebanese restaurants. And *Indian*? We have [one of the most renowned Desi corridors](#) in the Western Hemisphere. Or Sulzberger could go try the adventurous and veggie-friendly ethnic food up in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, which has a large Hmong population and more Somalis than any other U.S. city.

Not that he would need to come north to eat good veggie food. As the response to his article has made clear, all he'd have to do is look a little harder--and leave his preconceived notions back home in New York.

The timing of Sulzberger's article is as odd as its imprecision of place: vegetarian-friendly eating has been on the rise in the States for years. Elsewhere in the *Times*, Mark Bittman [highlights](#) the fact that beef consumption has been going down for 20 years, and chicken and pork for five. We eat 12 percent less meat than we did in 2007. Rightly impressed by this number, Bittman asks if "*anyone* in this country [is] eating *more* meat than they used to?"

Well, I am. I was a strict vegetarian for years, but in the last year or so I've backed off and started eating a little meat a couple times a week. I still believe that the single most important pro-environment lifestyle change Americans can make is to eat way less meat. But at some point I realized that my absolutism about this had more to do with my image than my health or personal ethics. I bike or take the bus to work but share a car with my wife on the weekends; I use a clothesline but don't totally shun the dryer. So why not be a *flexitarian*, allowing me both to indulge in a bit of sausage and to be a lower-maintenance dinner guest?

The not-so-great reason was that I enjoyed the virtuous identity marker of "vegetarian." Sulzberger seems to find feelings of superiority attractive as well, and the *Times* can always use one more writer who looks down on places that aren't New York. But while he might never try the barbecue while serving as Kansas City bureau chief, I do hope he stops relying on stereotypes about the place. And learns the definition of "Midwest."