

Demand for healthy alternatives is increasing meat-eaters' appetites for an old-fashioned alternative.

By Melanie Parker

Greener pastures, better beef?

On a sultry morning last fall in Montgomery, Alabama, 650 farmers from around the country crammed into a long hall at the state fairgrounds. For 9 hours, they listened intently while speakers at the first annual Grazefest introduced new ideas about an old approach to cattle farming: raising them entirely on grass.

Health-conscious—and mad-cow anxious—consumers, along with ranchers looking to save family farms, are rediscovering this alternative to beef raised in large-scale feedlots on diets of starchy corn. While grass-fed T-bones and rump roasts haven't yet made it into most supermarkets around the country, more home cooks are seeking out mail-order sources or connecting directly with local producers. The alternative beef is also showing up on restaurant menus across the country, from Acme Chophouse in San Francisco to Savoy in New York.

And there may be good reasons for this development. A 6-ounce grass-fed steak has 100 fewer calories, due to its lower fat content, than its grain-fed twin. Plus, grass-fed cuts pack up to four times as much vitamin A, three times the vitamin E (both powerful antioxidants), and at least twice the omega-3 fatty acids, which may offer cardiovascular benefits. "Nutrients in the meat drop significantly when the animal's diet is switched from grass to grain," says Utah State University animal scientist Tilak Dhiman, PhD. Another advantage of grass-fed beef (and the milk that comes from grass-fed dairy cows) over conventionally raised beef is that it also supplies more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a naturally occurring fatty acid. Animal studies suggest that CLA could slow some types of heart disease, as well as cancer, according to the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, an independent panel of nationally recognized nutrition and medical experts chosen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Grain-fed beef and milk contain nearly five times less CLA than the minimum dose required for anticarcinogenic benefits," Dhiman says, "whereas one 6-ounce serving of grass-fed beef supplies nearly one-third the amount of CLA we need in our diet." Human studies have not clearly demonstrated similar effects on cholesterol and cancer, though, so it's too early to tell whether to make the switch to grass-fed for the CLA boost alone.

Part of the allure, too, is for what grass-fed beef is not. Raised on pasture, cattle thrive without the steady diet of hormones (to promote growth) and the antibiotics fed to conventionally raised beef. Evidence that the use of antimicrobials in animal feed may lead to antibiotic resistance in humans is of enough concern that the American Medical

Association has issued a policy statement formally opposing it. Plus, because experts suspect that contaminated animal protein in cattle feed is the primary cause of mad-cow disease, grass-fed beef may hold an advantage over its conventional cousin in that regard, as well.

But with a USDA definition that recognizes livestock having spent "80 percent or more" of its life on grass as "grass-fed," it's tough to determine just how green your beef is. "Frankly, you need to know the farmer who produced it," says Jo Robinson of the pro-grass-fed Web site, www.eatwild.com. Whether you're buying directly from a farmer or an online source, Robinson recommends seeking out beef that's marketed as "pasture-finished and 100 percent grass-fed."

Typically, you'll pay more for grass-fed—if you can find it. Many farmers sell by the quarter and half-animal (which usually ends up costing less than regular beef at supermarket retail), but it may be more than your freezer can handle. Depending on the source, a pound of sirloin will cost anywhere from \$3.75 to \$9.75 per pound.

Should you carve out a space in your freezer for grass-fed beef? It makes sense if it's available, as long as you like the texture (it can be tough) and flavor, which executive chef Thorn Fox of Acme Chophouse describes as "nuanced, cleaner, and less cloying" than the fattier grain-fed. Plus, you'll know you're doing some small farmer a big favor.

Where's the Beef?

If you want to give grass-fed beef a try, look to these sources:

www.eatwild.com lists 750 producers from all 50 states.

www.localharvest.org features local resources, including markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and farms

www.eatwellguide.org provides a directory of sustainably raised meat, dairy, and produce.

Not ready to make the switch to grass-fed beef?

These brands guarantee that no antibiotics, hormones, or animal by-products were used in production.

Laura's Lean Beef is available in fresh-meat departments at grocery stores nationwide.—Details: www.laurasleanbeef.com

Niman Ranch beef is praised by chefs from coast to coast and can be found at Whole Foods, Wild Oats, and Trader Joe's markets. Details: www.nimanranch.com.

Coleman Natural Beef is sold in supermarkets across the country. Details: www.colemannatural.com

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