

EATING WELL; There's More to Like About Grass-Fed Beef

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FROM Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Westchester County and Sparky's All-American Food in New York to Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and Acme Chophouse in San Francisco, more diners are switching to rich, juicy and tender grass-fed beef, which is fast losing its reputation as tough and tasteless but good for you.

My own delicious research shows the industry has taken giant steps. When I wrote about grass-fed beef in 2002 there were about 50 producers, and most of what they raised was not very good. Now there are about 1,000 of them, and after I grilled rib-eyes from 15 producers for friends, it was clear that more of them are learning to get it right.

Four of the steaks -- the ones from Tallgrass Beef, Laurel Ridge Grass Fed Beef, U.S. Wellness Meats and Whippoorwill Farm -- brought back memories of the beefy flavor meat had before cattle were stuffed with grain in feedlots. Nine of the other ones appealed to those who do not like a deep beefy taste and prefer a milder flavor not unlike that found in most corn-fed beef today.

While none of the steaks melted in my mouth -- steaks seldom did until they became filled with fat from corn-feeding over the past 50 years -- they were quite tender.

Only two of them were the tough and tasteless grass-fed beef that people had come to expect.

Ranchers of grass-fed beef say they have made great strides in the last few years by relearning what came naturally before the era of the feedlot, then building on it. They use heritage breeds that thrive on

grass rather than on grain, as well as crossbreeds developed with advanced genetics.

They have relearned the science of rotating pastures and determined which grasses provide better nutrition in a region like the Northeast, where pastures are not endless, as they are in the West.

Humane, nonstressful slaughter is considered even more important than in the conventional cattle industry, where the practice is being slowly adopted.

And, finally, they are aging the beef longer to tenderize it more.

"The meat people got from us this year is better than what they got from us last year and not as good as what they will get from us next year," said Tom German, owner of Thankful Harvest in Holstein, Iowa.

But producers are still on a learning curve, and grass-fed beef is not always consistent.

Some producers improve tenderness by feeding the animals grain for several weeks before they are slaughtered; some restaurateurs say it is easier to please customers with this grain-finished meat.

Melissa Benavidez, who owns Sparky's All-American Food with her husband, Brian, has been so overwhelmed by the response to their grass-fed burgers that, on occasion, they have had to settle for beef that was finished with grain.

"We've been doing rock 'n' roll concerts, and people who haven't eaten hamburger in 20 years say they are going to try it," she said. "Even vegetarians."

Galen Zamorra, chef and owner of Mas in New York, chooses 100 percent grass-fed beef for meatballs, steak tartare and braising. But for steaks and roasts he wants beef that has been grain-finished.

"Pure 100 percent grass-fed is better for animals, more sustainable," Mr. Zamarra said. "But as far as texture, customers don't like it."

Yet at Acme Chophouse, grass-fed beef accounts for 60 percent to 80 percent of the orders. Thom Fox, manager of the restaurant, said it had improved considerably since he opened four years ago.

"In the beginning customers complained," he said. "The first thing they react to is tenderness. If you get past that they say they like the robust flavor."

In fact, there is not enough grass-fed, grass-finished beef to go around.

Finishing animals on grain for 15 to 30 days is still a far cry from agribusiness cattle, which start out on grass but are fed corn for their last four to six months.

Research suggests grass-fed beef is likely to be lower in total fat, contain higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids useful in reducing the risk of heart disease and have a higher level of C.L.A., conjugated linoleic acid, which, in animal studies, reduces the risk of cancer.

But the loose definition of grass-fed beef makes it difficult for people looking for alternatives to figure out just what they are buying. There is no regulation defining the term, and the Department of Agriculture has proposed letting cattle be called grass-fed even if they were raised on hay in a feedlot and never set hoof in a pasture.

The American Grassfed Association, which represents producers of 100 percent grass-fed animals, says a true grass-fed animal is put on pasture as soon as it is weaned and eats grass as long as it is available. When there is no more fresh grass the animal is fed hay and silage. Hormones and antibiotics are forbidden.

Jo Robinson, a writer who has spread the word about the benefits of pasture-raised animals, recognizes the quandary. At her Web site

eatwild.com, Ms. Robinson writes: "Meat from an animal that has been able to graze in its last few months of life is still nutritionally superior to feedlot beef, even if the animal has also been given some grain. It's a matter of degree."

But my tasting showed that with 100 percent grass-fed beef you can have it all: sustainable, more nutritious beef with clean, juicy, beefy flavor. (Because the beef has less fat, though, it must be cooked at lower temperatures and for less time.)

"Consumers need to understand there is a difference," said Ed Doyle, owner of Real Food, a consulting firm that works with restaurant management in Boston. "Grass-fed beef is not an alternative to commodity beef; it's its own product with bolder flavors."

Grazing

Following are suppliers of the best grass-fed steaks that were sampled. Supplies are limited and shipping is not included. Prices are per pound.

FULL FLAVORED

LAUREL RIDGE -- Nice beef taste, juicy, slightly chewy. Rib-eye, \$23; ground beef, \$6. No mail order, farm stand opens Saturday. 66 Wigwam Road, Litchfield, Conn., (860) 567-8122, lrgfb.com.

TALLGRASS BEEF -- Superb flavor, juicy, tender. Four 14-ounce rib-eyes, \$69.99; four pounds ground beef, \$22.99. Sedan, Kan., (877) 822-8283, tallgrassbeef.com.

U.S. WELLNESS MEATS -- Very tender. Average 15-ounce rib-eye, \$18.99; ground beef, \$4.79 to \$5.79. Monticello, Mo., (877) 383-0051, uswellnessmeats.com.

WHIPPOORWILL FARM -- Complex flavor, beefy, tender. Rib-eye,

\$16; ground beef, \$5. 189 Salmon Kill Road, Lakeville, Conn., open Saturday and by appointment; (860) 435-2089, allenandrobin.com.

MILDER

AMERICAN GRASS FED BEEF -- Pleasingly chewy. Four 8-ounce rib-eyes, \$58.95; 10 pounds ground beef, \$81.95; includes shipping. Doniphan, Mo., (866) 255-5002, americangrassfedbeef.com.

BURGUNDY PASTURE BEEF -- Tender, medium beef flavor. Rib-eye, \$14.99; ground beef, \$3.69. Grandview, Tex., (817) 866-2247, burgundypasturebeef.com.

CABBAGE HILL FARM GRASS FED BEEF -- Nicely chewy, pleasing flavor. Rib-eye, \$10.99; ground beef, \$6.50. At Flying Pig, Mount Kisco, N.Y., train station; (914) 666-7445.

LASATER GRASSLANDS BEEF -- Tender, juicy, medium beef flavor. Rib-eye, \$20.80; ground beef, \$5. Matheson, Colo., (866) 454-2333, lgbeef.com.

LA CENSE BEEF -- Nicely chewy. Eight-ounce rib-eye, \$18.75; ground beef, \$6. Dillon, Mont., (866) 442-2333, lacensebeef.com.

LEWIS WAITE FARM -- Herb and grass notes, tender. Rib-eye, \$9.50; ground beef, \$4.50. Jackson, N.Y., (518) 692-9208, lewiswaitefarm.com.

PANORAMA GRASS-FED MEATS -- Tender, juicy, some organic. Widely available in grocery stores and restaurants in the West. Vina, Calif., (530) 668-8920, panoramameats.com.

THANKFUL HARVEST -- Pleasant taste, organic. Rib-eye, \$14; ground beef, \$4.50. Holstein, Iowa, (712) 830-3281; e-mail: tagerman@netllc.net.

WHEEL-VIEW FARM -- Tender. Rib-eye, \$10.95; ground beef, \$4.50. Shelburne, Mass., (413) 625-2900, wheelviewfarm.com.

Other sources for grass-fed beef include eatwellguide.org; Jo Robinson's eatwild.com and chefscollaborative.org.