

EATING WELL; The Greening of the Herd

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EARLY May weather in Vermont is predictable in its unpredictability. In one of the state's most beautiful farming communities, wintery gusts of wind were blowing across the Flack Family Farm while budding trees promised spring. Occasional shafts of sunlight broke through the clouds to light the chickens, pigs, sheep and cows grazing on fields of luscious green grass.

Doug Flack and his daughter, Sarah, have 18 head of cattle here in this pastoral bit of northwestern Vermont, including a new crop of calves happy to be petted, 30 plump hens making a racket around the henhouse, 40 sheep and their lambs somewhere over the hill and 23 sows, boars and piglets, which roto-till the soil, readying it for planting crops. All the animals here are raised the old-fashioned way, and the cows and sheep survive on a diet made up exclusively of grass.

Mr. Flack is at the forefront of a nascent agricultural movement that is slowly gaining strength in small pockets of the United States and abroad, one that has turned away from the modern industrial feedlot, where animals are fed a steady diet of corn and antibiotics, in favor of the ancient methods of the herdsman, where cattle are raised on grass -- more healthfully, supporters say -- without hormones or routine use of antibiotics.

The flavor of grass-fed animals is capturing the attention of chefs on both coasts. In New York, Jonathan Waxman is serving grass-fed veal at Washington Park; at Anne Rosenzweig's Inside, both grass-fed beef and veal are on the menu, as they are at Dan Barber's Blue Hill and Peter Hoffman's Savoy. Cesare Casella is readying a herd of grass-fed cows upstate for his restaurant, Beppe, while serving superb pasture-raised pork. In California, Alice Waters has ordered grass-fed beef for Chez Panisse in Berkeley, and Traci Des Jardins is serving it at Acme

Chophouse in San Francisco. While it's not yet widely available, grass-fed beef is in specialty markets in the Bay Area.

Americans are coming late to this old-fashioned way of raising animals. Pampas-raised beef from Argentina is renowned as some of the best in the world; many European farmers never stopped raising animals on grass; and the English never gave it up entirely.

Indeed, pasture-raised meat from small independent farms has gained many supporters in England since the outbreak of mad cow disease that effectively crippled the British commercial beef industry, thought to be the result of feeding cows parts of infected animals. Prince Charles in particular has been a vocal proponent of the grass-feeding movement; today there are superb examples of grass-fed meat at many butcher shops and at least two new up-market restaurants in London: Notting Grill and Smiths of Smithfields.

In short, feeding animals a grass diet is hardly a new trend. Pasture-raised meat is what Heidi and her border collie were after in the Swiss Alps with Peter the goatherd in the 19th century. It's what nomads have done for hundreds of years, and it's how cattle were raised in this country until the 1950's, when fertilizer companies began to offer farmers subsidies to use their fertilizers to grow grain. Corn soon replaced grass as the feed of choice for the last months of a steer's life; it fattened the cattle faster than grass and was available year-round. Before long the term "corn fed" was as good as saying the tenderest meat in the world.

The peasant wisdom of yore has been advanced by science. "It's medieval farming meets modern technology," Mr. Flack said. "Instead of having children making sure animals don't graze in the wrong pasture, we have electronic fences and remote control to start and stop the fences."

Many small farmers, especially in the Northeast, which has the country's best grass, are pursuing grass-fed animals as a way to save family farms. Not so incidentally, they point to the human health and

environmental advantages of animals raised this way. Mr. Flack is one of the few who are concerned with the taste of those animals. Taste, after all, is what will ultimately sell his product in the open market.

"What we produce is exquisite meat, not a smooshy tenderness, a nice texture and not lean," he said. "I think lean meat is dreadful. Ours is juicy and smooth, not gristly. It's beef that tastes like that sweet smell you smell when you go into the barn."

I'll have to take his word for it. Mr. Flack didn't have a single piece to sample. It's one of the problems with grass-fed animals, at least from a consumer's point of view: with only some exceptions, they are available seasonally and even then must generally be ordered in advance, like Bordeaux futures.

Farmers like Mr. Flack don't even think of themselves as cattlemen. Ask him his profession, and he will say, "I raise grass." Farmers who pasture-raise their animals must be first and foremost grass farmers, said Allan Nation, owner and publisher of *The Stockman Grass Farmer*, a magazine in Hattiesburg, Miss., that has been cheerleading the grass-fed movement since 1984.

"We were supposed to be harvesting grass for animals and not raising animals. We've all forgotten that," Mr. Nation said. If a farmer doesn't raise grass, he will soon find himself feeding his animals grain. "That's how we got into trouble."

Yet for grass-fed meat to become mainstream in the United States, growers will have to solve a taste and texture problem. Most of the grass-fed meat available to consumers here is at the point of quality where organic food sat, wilted and withered, 20 years ago. Today there is some grass-fed meat that is superior to the meat harvested from grain-fed animals, like that I tasted from River Run Farm in Oregon, but after tasting 32 samples of pasture-raised beef, pork, veal and lamb from 19 different farms, I know that much of it is wildly inconsistent, often tough and stringy, with an off taste. Still, many

people who choose grass-fed meat do so for reasons that have more to do with health and the environment than they have to do with taste. For example, grass-fed animals are less likely to harbor deadly bacteria like E. coli O157:H7. Their meat has fewer calories and less fat, and it has within it high levels of conjugated linoleic acid, which, in preliminary animal studies, has shown promise in cancer reduction. Grass-fed animals also have more omega-3 fatty acids than corn-fed ones, and although the omega-3's differ from those in fish, they may still be beneficial.

For those reasons among others, demand for grass-fed meat has increased far beyond this country's ability to produce it. Certainly it has surpassed the farmers' ability to produce grass-fed meat that is consistently flavorful and tender. "Quite frankly," Mr. Nation said, "the demand has been so great we haven't focused on the quality of it."

Still, people are clamoring. "We're thinking of selling it on eBay," said Jonathan Chase, who grazes close to 300 cows in Derby Line, Vt. The concept has occurred to more than one frustrated farmer.

"We are just at the beginning of this," said Ridgway Shinn III, director of the New England Livestock Alliance. "Realistically it will be a couple of years before we have a significant number of animals."

There are three keys to the development of tender, tasty and juicy grass-fed animals, experts say: the quality of the grass; the process by which they are slaughtered and aged; and their genetic makeup. America has the grass, though it is not enough to bring all animals raised here to market. It is slowly opening slaughterhouses. But it doesn't have the genetics.

"Mongrels," said Gearld Fry, a partner in the Jacob Alliance, a livestock consulting firm in Rose Bud, Ark., speaking of a majority of cattle in this country. (Conventional cattlemen consider the firm's work to be part of a hopelessly radical movement.) "Most of them have been bred for the feedlots to be huge and don't do well on grass.

What we want to do is bring the animals back to the proper genetic makeup and back to what they were meant to eat -- grass."

Importing semen from cattle abroad will produce "astronomical numbers in five years," Mr. Fry added. "Only one-tenth of the cows and one-tenth of 1 percent of the bulls are genetically superior animals in this country."

Once the right cows are here, farmers will have to learn how to manage the grass they do have. Intensive rotational grass management is the term Mr. Flack uses; it involves electrified fences that allow the farmer to move the cattle from one pasture to another so they don't overgraze. Depending on the season, the period of time a herd is allowed to graze in a particular field may be no more than half a day; at most it will be three days. Then the grass has to be given a chance to grow back. "If it is not done properly," Mr. Flack said, "over time the quality of the land goes down and the quality of the animals goes down."

Sales of most grass-fed meat in the United States take place locally, and much of that meat is sold frozen. Still, as many in the business of raising it point out, grass-fed meat seems to be on the same trajectory as organic food once was. It will become more readily available as interest in its flavor and health benefits increase.

"Just like organic vegetables," said Allen Williams, an animal geneticist and a partner in the Jacob Alliance, "the lunatic fringe has become mainstream."

Mail-Order Meats

ONLY a few farms sell grass-fed meat by mail, as indicated. Here are some recommendations.

River Run Farm, Clatskanie, Ore., (503) 728-4561. Beef.

Jamison Farm, Latrobe, Pa., mail order, (800) 237-5262. Lamb.

Western Grasslands, Alturas, Calif. (916) 443-4319. Beef.

Porky Pine Hill, Bovina, N.Y., 607-832-4574. Pork.
Wild Idea Buffalo Company, Rapid City, S.D., mail order, (866) 658-6137. Bison.

In August, meat will be available by mail from the New England Livestock Alliance, at (413) 477-6200 or www.nelivestockalliance.org: Harrier Fields Farm, Schodack Landing, N.Y. Beef; Bowman Road Farm, Barnard, Vt. Beef; Watson Farm, Jamestown, R.I. Lamb; Out of the Woods Farm, Hardwick, Mass. Pork.

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Correction: June 5, 2002, Wednesday A listing of mail-order sources for grass-fed meat last Wednesday, with the Eating Well column, referred erroneously in some copies to Cabbage Hill Farm in Mount Kisco, N.Y. Products from the farm are sold locally, not by mail.