



Corn-Fed Beef and Grass-Finished Beef

Background:

More than ever before, consumers have a lot of questions about their food and beef is no exception. They see cattle grazing in the fields and fresh beef in the meat case but don't know what happens in that "gray area" in between.

Unfortunately, anti-animal agriculture activist groups exploit this lack of knowledge and thirst for information. They use terms like "*factory farming*" and "*industrial agriculture*" as they try to cast modern beef production in a negative light. They want consumers to believe modern beef production is harmful to the environment, cruel to animals and produces unsafe and unhealthy food. And most of the time, they think of modern beef production as a feedlot.

Definitions:

Corn-fed (conventional): Corn-fed, also known as conventional or grain-fed, is the most widely produced kind of beef in the U.S. This is the product most consumers see in the meat case at the supermarket. Conventional beef assures a consistent, year-round supply of high quality beef with the tenderness and flavor most consumers prefer. Corn-fed beef cattle spend most of their lives in range or pasture conditions eating grass. At 12 to 18 months of age, conventional cattle are moved to a feedlot and are usually separated into groups of 100 animals and live in pens that allow about 125 to 250 square feet of room per animal. Cattle usually spend four to six months in a feedlot, during which they are fed a scientifically formulated ration of corn and/or silage, hay and distillers grains.

Grass-fed: Consumers typically don't know that all cattle spend the majority of their lives eating grass in pastures. Calves start grazing at a young age and are kept on pasture after they are weaned until 12-18 months of age. Then, they are taken to a feedlot or are kept on grass to become "*grass-finished*". In North America it's difficult to produce grass-fed beef in large due to limited growing seasons. That's why most grass-finished beef is imported from Australia and New Zealand where grass grows all year.

Grass-finished: Also called free-range, grass-finished cattle eat only a grass and forage-based diet throughout their whole lifespan. Grass-finished beef is often described as having a distinct taste and may require different preparation methods, including marinades and shorter cooking times.

Natural: The definition of "natural" beef can confuse some consumers. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), natural means that a product is minimally processed and contains no additives. By this definition, most beef in the meat case is natural. Many companies are raising beef under "natural" production practices. Common "natural" production claims include, "raised without hormones," "raised without antibiotics," "free range" and "vegetarian fed." Since the definition of "natural" production practices can vary, it is important for consumers to read labels carefully to understand what a particular company means when it says "natural."

Certified Organic: Certified organic beef must meet USDA's National Organic Program standards. Organically-raised cattle must be fed 100 percent organic feed, and they may not be given hormones to promote growth or antibiotics for any reason. Certified organic beef can be corn-fed or grass-finished. USDA states organically produced food is no safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced foods. Organic food differs *only* in the way it is grown, not how it's handled and processed. Like many organic products, organic beef is more expensive to produce, which results in higher prices than other beef choices in the meat case.

Important Information

Key Point #1: Consumer's have a choice

When it comes to beef, most consumers tell us that taste is their highest priority. However, consumers' lifestyles and budgets have changed over time and beef production has evolved to meet those needs. For instance, we now provide consumers with corn- or grain-finished, grass-fed or grass-finished, certified organic and natural beef products. While each kind of beef offers something different to the consumer, all beef shares one common denominator that continues to spark demand: a safe, wholesome and nutritious meal.

Consumer need to know:

- Ways cattle are fed and raised provide range of options of beef for consumer
- All types of beef have the same safety and nutritional benefits.
 - All beef goes through a rigorous inspection process and is subject to strict government guidelines to ensure the highest level of safety, and all beef choices are a nutrient-rich source of protein, zinc, iron and many other nutrients.

Key Point #2: Modern beef production increases efficiency

Modern cattle feeding operations help increase the efficiency of beef production and enable us to produce more pounds of beef using fewer resources such as land, feed and water, and are heavily regulated to protect soil, water and air quality.

Consumer need to know:

- Modern beef production allows the U.S. to provide enough beef to feed Americans, as well as enough to be exported.
- The modern beef production system also provides a year-round supply of safe, wholesome and nutritious beef at an affordable price for consumers around the world.
- If all beef was grass-finished, we wouldn't have enough land to produce the amount of beef we do now with modern beef production. Also, we wouldn't be able to produce it at the same quantity year-round.
- Some consumers ask: ***Why don't we use the land that is grazed to grow crops to feed people?***
 - Grazing animals in the United States more than doubles the area that can be used to produce food while limiting soil erosion, preserving wildlife habitat and reducing the risk of wildfires.
 - Grazing cattle can be an environmentally friendly use of the land. But don't forget the ultimate benefit: by grazing cattle, we are converting forages unsuitable for human consumption into a great tasting source of high-quality protein we need in a healthy diet.

Key Point #3: Beef's Greenhouse Gas Emissions (corn-fed and grass-fed)

Animal agriculture contributes minimally to the production of total greenhouse gases in the United States. Cattle naturally produce methane, a greenhouse gas, but according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the entire U.S. agricultural sector contributed only 6.4 percent of total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2006.

Consumers may hear that cattle raised in a feedlot produce more methane than cattle raised alternative ways. The fact is, all cattle release methane as part of the digestive process. And according to a report released by the Hudson Institute's Center For Global Food Issues, pound-for-pound, beef produced in a conventional feeding system (or modern beef production) generates 40 percent less greenhouse gas emissions and uses two-thirds less land than beef produced using organic and grass-fed production systems.

Consumer need to know:

- The entire U.S. ag sector contributed only 6.4% of total U.S. GHG emissions in 2006 (EPA).
- All cattle (corn-fed or grass-fed) release methane as part of the digestive process.
- Conventional beef generates 40% LESS GHG emissions and uses 2/3's less land than beef produced using organic and grass-fed production systems.

Key Point #4: Beef Food Safety and Health

Consumers may think of steak as an indulgence, something to be enjoyed on special occasions but not necessarily as part of a healthy diet. Yet on average, the 29 lean beef cuts have less than 175 calories and all 29 meet the government definition for lean: less than 10 grams of total fat, 4.5 grams or less of saturated fat and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol per 3.5 ounce serving. On average, all of the 29 lean cuts have only one more gram of saturated fat than a skinless chicken breast, per three ounce serving, and all 29 have *less* total fat than a skinless chicken thigh!

Consumer need to know:

- Common misperception: Organic, natural or grass-fed beef healthier for me.
 - No matter what type of beef consumers choose, they can be confident all types of beef can be included in a healthy diet. All beef has eight times more vitamin B-12, six times more zinc and three times more iron than a skinless chicken breast. There are 29 cuts of beef (including 15 of the 20 most popular cuts) that meet government guidelines for lean. *This is true whether the beef is produced conventionally or as part of an organic, natural or grass-fed program.*
 - Grass-finished beef contains slightly more omega-3 fatty acids (less than one-tenth of a gram more per 3.5 ounces), but no specific type of beef is considered a primary source for omega-3s. Grass-finished beef also can provide more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than other beef. CLA is a polyunsaturated fatty acid health professionals believe has cancer fighting properties; however, it is not clear if there is a health benefit in this difference.
- According to the USDA, which sets the standard for foods to be labeled organic, organically produced food is no safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced foods.

Additional Resources:

Beef Checkoff Information – www.mybeefcheckoff.com

--Includes information on the Masters of Beef Advocacy program.

Beef Quality Assurance – www.bqa.org

Cattle Page – www.cattlepages.com

USDA – www.usda.gov

Explore Beef – www.explorebeef.org

Beef Industry Food Safety Council – www.bifsc.org

Various university studies