

Grass-fed beef: Does less fat equal less flavor?

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I recently read Michael Pollan's impassioned (and alarming) book, [The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), that explores "our national eating disorder." It's difficult to be a proud carnivore (or a fast food eater) after reading it, but somehow I didn't plunge headfirst into a vat of vegetarianism.

In one section, Pollan insightfully reports about the deplorable living conditions of factory-churned, corn-fed cattle, so shortly after reading it I earnestly sought out humanely-raised, grass-fed meat. I figured if I was going to continue to assert homo sapien's food-chain dominance, I could at least do it with a clear conscience.

Essentially, grass-fed means the cattle are born, raised and harvested to meet USDA Approved Grass-fed Protocol. This edict forbids the use of artificial hormones, confinement feeding, animal by-products and antibiotics. Turns out, there's not a helluva lot of places you can buy grass-fed beef in Tampa Bay. In fact, I only uncovered one reliable place: Whole Foods. And Mark Malowski, Meat Team Leader at the Tampa location, reports their three-month-old grass-fed beef program is booming. Their weekly delivery sells out every Monday, the day it hits the cooler.



Whole Foods — which has locally-sourced meat programs all over the U.S. — buys their beef from [White Oak Pastures](#) on the Florida-Georgia border, where the Harris Family has raised cattle since 1866. Their official certifications range from Certified Organic to Certified Humane and the "plant" is run by an artisan meat cutter.

A few months ago, White Oak Pastures formed a partnership with Whole Foods and now provides 15 stores in Florida and 19 more throughout the Southeast. Will Harris even built a slaughterhouse on site that complies with the strict requirements of Whole Foods.

Scott Chansky, Regional Meat Coordinator for Whole Foods, has been in the beef biz at this natural foods grocery store chain ten years. He sees two reasons for the shift to grass-fed: health and the impact on the environment. Grass-fed farmers don't spread pesticides on their grazing lands, a requirement if they want to label their meat "organic." The animals are never kept on overcrowded feedlots and the calves aren't separated from their mothers unnaturally.

Chansky says any Whole Foods meat partner must be USDA inspected, and the grocers bring in third-party inspectors to make sure the free-roaming animals have enough shade, food and water, as well as test any grain for organic certification. Essentially, they look for farmers doing the right thing — the animal's welfare plays a huge part.

You might notice Whole Foods doesn't sell Harris Family beef as "organic." Although [White Oak Pastures](#) is a certified organic farm, they feed their animals non-organic hay during the dry season.

On the health front, grass-fed beef is higher in beta carotene, vitamin E, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), omega fats and iron and has less fat and cholesterol than corn-fed. Because of this, Chansky recommends cooking it no more than medium-rare to medium.

So those who fled beef when it was touted as the evil fat empire can enjoy grass-fed with less guilt. For now, though, Whole Foods doesn't have a partner for humanely-treated chickens, but they're about four months away from announcing a deal with a Jacksonville-based hog farmer. The problem isn't finding a farm that treats their animals well; it's finding a farm that can handle the huge demand. It's no longer just about what you eat - it's also about how what you eat lived.

But let's talk flavor. Both Malowski and Chansky 'fessed up that corn-fed has more flavor due to the higher fat marbling content (the animals don't get as much exercise). And most people were brought up on corn-fed beef so the earthier flavor of grass-fed might knock people off kilter. When I tried it, it was a bit tougher (even cooked medium rare) but I felt better eating it. Maybe that saves me some heartburn.

[Whole Foods](#) is located at 1548 North Dale Mabry at I-275.

You can buy grass-fed beef online at [White Oak Pastures](#).