

Going Grass-Fed

The vast majority of American cattle today finish their lives away from pasture, confined to crowded feedlots and fed a steady diet of grain -- namely, corn.

While the term "corn-fed" traditionally connotes a certain wholesomeness, the ramifications of the practice are, in fact, somewhat darker.



As the writer Michael Pollan has pointed out, cattle evolved to eat grass, not grain. "A corn diet," he writes, "wreaks havoc on their digestive system, making it necessary to feed them antibiotics to stave off illness and infection."

Indeed, as readers of Eric Schlosser's best-seller, [Fast Food Nation](#), are aware, the beef industry has become just that: Industry. Administered hormones, stuck in [CAFOs](#) and fattened on a steady diet of maize and antibiotic pabulum (often mixed with other things cattle didn't evolve to eat -- namely, other cattle), most livestock today live a life far removed from the bucolic idylls of yore.

Corn, too, has its dark side. For one thing, it's heavily subsidized and, thus, grossly overproduced. For another, it demands vast doses of pesticides (more than any other food crop) as well as steady applications of nitrogen fertilizers, which in turn require large quantities of oil and natural gas to produce. Thus, as Pollan persuasively argues, we've managed to trade a wonderfully efficient solar-powered system of protein production for a hugely inefficient one largely dependent upon fossil fuels.

Bad for the environment, corn-fed beef is also bad for you. For starters, it's higher in saturated fats than its pasture-raised counterpart. Add to that the aforementioned hormones and antibiotic residues - not to mention the specter of E-coli bacteria and Mad Cow disease - and you may be inclined to reconsider that burger on your plate.

Luckily, there is an alternative; that is, going back to old-fashioned beef. Although far from abundant, some small-scale ranchers are still finishing their cattle the traditional way -- at pasture.

The product may surprise you. Not only is it leaner, the flavor is also more complex. As with wine, grass-fed beef varies by region, rather than having the industrialized uniformity we've become accustomed to. And, while some argue that corn-fed beef has the better flavor, it's worth noting that the famed steaks of Argentina come from grass-fed cattle.

Spared of the necessity of antibiotics and pesticides, grass-fed beef is also friendlier to the environment. Ranchers in the grass-fed market tend to be keen stewards of the land, concerned with proper grazing techniques and the nurturing of native grasses. Indeed, many such ranchers think of themselves as grass farmers first, cattle ranchers second.

Not surprisingly, grass-fed beef is more expensive than the typical supermarket product. It's also seasonal, available only in the late spring or early summer. Still, the price and inconvenience are a small price to pay in comparison with the detrimental aspects of industrial meat. What's more, with a little planning -- i.e., by buying in bulk and freezing the meat in parcels -- grass-fed beef can be made both economical and available year-round.

If you can't find grass-fed beef, consider organic beef as a next best choice. While organically raised animals may still be confined in feeding operations and finished on grain rather than natural forage, they should at least be free of hormones, antibiotics and pesticides.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that you should be eating more beef. Rather, the point is simply that, by buying beef conscientiously, you can enjoy a fine steak and help steer modern agriculture in the right direction.

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[Eat Wild](#) is a website that calls itself the Clearinghouse for Information about Pasture-Based Farming. It includes links to suppliers across the United States, including purveyors of pasture-raised poultry, pork, and dairy as well.

[Power Steer](#), by journalist Michael Pollan, appeared in the March 31, 2002 edition of the New York Times Magazine. It is a brief but eye-opening look at the realities of the modern meat industry.

Source: <http://www.sierraclub.org/e-files/grassfed.asp>

Photo above courtesy USDA.