

## **Steak: Grass-fed beef is gaining in popularity, but grain-fed still has its backers**

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By Cathy Thomas, The Orange County Register

Oh, the decisions. It used to be easy to decide which steaks to buy. You based the purchase on which cut you preferred and whether you wanted to pay the premium price for beef labeled "choice" (a grade that notes plentiful fat streaking called marbling) or, if you could find it, "prime" (a grade with even more marbling) instead of the less-flavorful "select" grade found in many supermarkets.

Our concerns focused on flavor and texture, not the cattle's dinner.

But now that the grass-fed movement is gaining steam, shoppers have a choice about whether they want to buy meat from cows that have eaten a 100 percent grass diet or those that have been fattened up in feedlots on grain (or specifically corn). Proponents of pasture-only beef point to research that shows the health benefits of grass-fed cattle \_ a lower fat and calorie count, and an increased amount of beneficial omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin E. Plus, grass-fed beef is free of antibiotics; holding cattle in feedlots can cause illness, which encourages some producers to mix antibiotics into the feed. Often they are also given hormones to grow bigger faster.

We like to picture cattle roaming on rolling green hills, munching exclusively on lush native grasses. It's a feel-good, "happy cow" image.

But critics contend that pasture-finished beef can be tough. Some say it just doesn't have the right taste.

To find out more about the grass-fed vs. grain-fed issues, I spoke with a cattleman, a chef, and a supermarket meat buyer.

Will Harris, beef director for the American Grassfed Association and owner of White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Ga.:

"What I tell people, tongue in cheek, when they ask about grass-fed beef, is that except for being safer, more nutritious, better for the environment, a more humane treatment of the animals, more supportive of the American farm system, and with a better taste, there's no difference in grass-fed from industrial feedlot beef," said Harris, owner of a 100,000-acre grass-fed-only cattle farm that has been in his family since 1866.

Figures published in several publications place grass-fed beef sales at 3 percent of the beef sold in the United States last year. Harris said that figure "doesn't sound incorrect" but added that sales are very difficult to quantify.

"You need to remember that 10 to 20 years ago that number was doggone close to zero percent," he said. "Sales are definitely on the increase."

Before the advent of feedlots after World War II, American beef was all grass-fed. Because cattle put on weight more quickly, grain-fed beef came to dominate the market. It offered consumers an increased beef supply at more affordable prices.

"I don't want to sound like I'm too critical of the industrialized beef industry," he said. "Folks might be hungry otherwise. My beef isn't for folks going through the market with a calculator, trying to buy by price alone. I produce a high-quality product for an enlightened customer that is willing to pay more."

When asked about cooking grass-fed steaks, Harris said to grill it on a lower flame.

"High heat is not the friend of grass-fed beef," he said. "Season it with salt and pepper, eat it rarer and cook it slowly over a lower heat. For summer grilling side dishes with steak, oh, maybe I'd serve hamburgers or a roast. For me there are just three food groups: beef, wine and ice cream."

Mike Hacaga, regional meat coordinator for Whole Foods Markets:

"For New York steaks, there is about a two to three dollar difference between grass-finished and grain-fed beef," Hacaga said about his favorite cut of steak. "A 12-ounce grain-fed New York is approximately \$16.99, or \$19.99 for grass-finished (at Whole Foods Market).

"Sales of grass-finished beef continue to grow. Two years ago, sales were 85 (percent) grain-fed to 15 (percent) grass-finished. Now it's almost 60 to 40, grain-fed to grass-finished."

Instead of grass-fed, Hacaga likes to call it "grass-finished" because most cattle start out eating grass. Grain-fed animals are kept in crowded feedlots as they mature, while grass-fed "finish" with grass.

He says that at Whole Foods Markets, the grass-finished beef is also labeled "certified organic" (raised without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones, genetic engineering, radiation or synthetic pesticides or fertilizers; animals are given 100 percent organic feed).

As for the flavor of grass-finished beef, he said that in his opinion the "taste is exquisite."

"What the palate has become used to is grain- and corn-fed beef," he said. "Grass-finished is a more natural beef taste. The cooking process requires more attention. The target for steaks is medium-rare. The temperature should be slower. No super-hot grills.

"I like to use a rub that has kosher salt, garlic powder, coarse black pepper, and a little bit of granulated onion powder ... nothing to overwhelm the flavor."

For summer steak grilling, he said that he's from the Chicago area and has Midwestern tastes. He likes to accompany his steak with a good mound of garlic mashed potatoes and grilled corn on the cob. Maybe some sliced tomatoes topped with balsamic vinaigrette to start.

Andrew Sutton, executive chef, Napa Rose, Grand Californian Hotel, Anaheim:

Constantly searching for luscious new products, Sutton and his staff conduct frequent taste tests of produce, wines, cheeses and meats. When it comes to beef, he fires up the grill and does side-by-side comparisons of everything he can get his hands on. Just in New York steaks alone, the Napa Rose serves up about 65 to 70 orders on any given Saturday night. He wants his guests to have the best.

"I like working with natural meats, which can mean grass-fed," he said. "But there is grain-fed natural beef, too, that is free of antibiotics, hormones and all that jazz. People see the beef industry as the evil monster. I don't think so. Generally speaking, a farmer takes advantage of weather. In drought years, there isn't much natural grass. Finishing in a feedlot and packing in the grain can become a necessity.

"Grain-fed beef and corn-fed specifically, will grade out higher; it will hit choice or prime levels more consistently. With grass-fed it's harder to get consistency; a cold snap can mean that the meat loses weight and marbling — and that meat can be tough. But now, meaning springtime, it should be a great time to buy and eat grass-fed beef because the grass should be green and plentiful.

"Grass-fed is a leaner beef and I don't doubt for one minute that it is higher in omega-3 fatty acids. The flavor is denser and can be slightly gamey \_ a little lamb-ish or venison-esque. I like to serve it sliced (slightly on the diagonal) so it is tender, then offer fleur de sel (delectable French sea salt) at the table for optional sprinkling. And I choose cuts that have more fat, such as rib-eyes, T-bones or New Yorks."

Sutton says he's still riding the fence on the grain-fed vs. grass-fed steak issue, but admits that he is sliding toward corn-fed beef at this time due to taste and texture consistency.

But whether it's grass-finished or grain-fed steaks that he's grilling, he sprinkles them with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper one hour before grilling. He says the salt seems to help the steaks caramelize better on the grill, as does bringing them to room temperature before grilling. On well-marbled grain-fed steaks, he trims off all the exterior fat and gristle before grilling. But for grass-fed, he leaves a ¼-inch wide strip of fat.

Once it's cooked, he says to let it rest about 10 minutes before serving or slicing.

As for a summer steak grill-a-thon, he suggests serving a roasted heirloom beet salad with watercress and crumbled blue cheese with those steaks.

I would imagine a good red wine would be part of his fun, too.

#### A HANKERING FOR HIGH-END STEAKS

A 6-ounce New York sirloin steak for \$120? I couldn't resist.

I rationalized by telling myself it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, in fact, a professional responsibility. My husband, Phil, encouraged me. He wanted a bite, too. Besides, he's a disciple of the "eat-now, pay-much-later" school of ordering.

I'd been eager to try 100 percent Japanese Wagyu beef. A recent dinner at Wolfgang Puck's steakhouse, Cut, in Beverly Hills, gave me my first opportunity. At the restaurant, the menu specified that the Japanese Wagyu was from the Kagoshima Prefecture in Kyushu, Japan. Tim, our server, showed us a raw sample. It was so densely marbled with fat, it was an oh-so pale bridesmaid's pink. No wonder some call it "white steak."

Wagyu is a Japanese cattle breed. Authentic Kobe beef is Wagyu that has been raised in the Kobe area of Japan (and word is it's beer-fed as well as grain-fed). Since the 1970s, Wagyu has been raised in the United States and Australia. Phil ordered an 8-ounce crossbreed steak that was part American Wagyu and part Angus, a "Kobe Style" New York from Snake River Farms in Idaho. It was a mere \$70.

My "real" Wagyu turned out to be a caramelized 4-inch square of unctuous decadence. A clear puddle of fat formed on the plate as I pushed the fork's blunt edge through one corner. One bite coated my mouth with richness. Not in a beef-y way, more in an intense foie-gras-esque way. Phil's American Wagyu-Angus was a beefier bite, more to chew and less to slurp.

#### How to grill grass-fed steaks

The rule of thumb for grilling grass-fed steaks is to cook on medium heat rather than the high heat that is used to sear fattier grain-fed beef. And because grass-fed steaks are leaner, cook them to medium rare (not well-done) to retain juiciness. Allow cooked steak to rest 8 to 10 minutes before serving or slicing.

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