

## Grass-fed beef returns

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**“THIS IS A VALUE-ADDED AGRICULTURAL PRODUCT THAT HELPS SUPPORT FAMILY FARMING.”**

These days, grass-fed beef may be something of a specialty product, but not long ago it was all you'd find in a meat case. Only in the past 50 years or so have cattle been going to feedyards to eat grain. Now those old grassfed ways may be making a comeback. Who's bringing them back?



According to Patricia Whisnant, who owns a family-operated farm in Missouri that produces meat for [www.americangrassfedbeef.com](http://www.americangrassfedbeef.com), “the market base is someone who has educated themselves as to the health benefits of the product, or the more humane, sustainable way of producing it. They are well aware of why they want it.”

Whisnant says demand for her product is increasing. Her customers may be health enthusiasts, sustainable-agriculture supporters or animal-welfare advocates – or maybe all three. Recently, customers concerned about food safety are coming to her, as well; some customers like the idea that her cattle could not accidentally have been exposed to contaminated feed.

“Researchers still believe that BSE has to do with feeding animals byproducts,” Whisnant says. “These animals have been on clean, green pasture all their lives.” But her best selling point may still be the method of production.

“This is a value-added agricultural product that helps support family farming,” Whisnant says. “People buy it because of the story behind it.”

Will Harris found the same thing to be true. Harris owns White Oak Pastures in Georgia and recently made a trial arrangement with 15 Publix stores in Atlanta to sell his grass-fed beef. He is in the process of visiting each store, doing product demonstrations with a chef who prepares meatballs from his ground beef. In talking to customers, Harris found their interest in his product was most aroused when it came up that Harris' family has been on the farm since 1886 and that his daughters are the fifth generation there.

Getting customers' attention with demonstrations is critical, Harris says, because while people are interested in the product, they may just be too busy to learn about it.

“If you just threw it in the meat cooler, I think it would stay there until the next flood,” he says. “But once they focus on it, they think it's the right thing to do.”

Harris, who also sells his products on [www.whiteoakpastures.com](http://www.whiteoakpastures.com), is quick to point out that he has nothing negative to say about grain-fed beef. He just wants to offer an alternative.

“This is a segment of the market that is sophisticated, well-informed and has made a studied decision about what they want to eat,” he says. “It will probably always be a niche market.”



Grass-fed-beef suppliers say a cow's body functions best on a grass diet, which helps its stomach maintain a neutral pH level.



Some retailers use demonstrations to bring shoppers' attention to grass-fed beef in the meat case.

### **Grass-fed and grass-finished**

One reason that it is likely to be so is the limits of production capacity. “Unfortunately, we don't have possibilities for largescale grass-finished production in this country,” says Randy Irion, director of retail marketing services for the National grass-fed beef returns Cattlemen's Beef Association. “Most grass- finished beef is imported from places where they can grow grass year-round.”

He points out that there is a distinction between grass-fed and grass-finished beef, though the terms are often used interchangeably. Just about every cow is grass-fed; only a few are grass-finished.

There is no census of grass-finished animals in this country.

In its 2004 audit, the NCBA didn't see much evidence of grass-finished beef in the market. Irion estimates that the percent of stores that carry it is in the low single-digits.

### **Select stores**

But select stores are carrying the product. At the Berkeley Bowl in California, meat manager Mike Myers started handling grass-fed beef about three years ago, after a New York Times article about it caused him to be inundated with requests. He started with a couple of cuts and now has almost every cut available in grass-fed, which makes up about 30 to 35 percent of his beef sales.

Grass-fed is 12 percent of beef sales at PCC Natural Food Stores in Washington. Paul Schmidt, director of merchandising, returned grass-fed beef to his meat case last October at the request of some of his customers.

The health benefits are a good selling point, Schmidt says; those include a higher level of omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid. The beef is also higher in betacarotene and lower in calories, cholesterol and saturated fat, Whisnant says.

Schmidt says that part of his store's philosophy is to support local producers, so all of the store's grass-fed beef comes from a Washington farm, which sends a representative to do in-store demonstrations. The store offers a

point-of sale brochure with cooking tips; it's helpful to know, for instance, that cooking time is 10 to 25 percent shorter than for conventional beef. In its monthly newsletter, PCC ran a full front-page article when it reintroduced the product, explaining that the taste profile is different than conventional beef.

Irion describes it as an acquired taste. "Grass-finished is a little gamier, more intense," he says.

The United States beef industry is consumer-focused and market-driven. In the end, consumer choices lead the industry's efforts."

*Randy Irion, director of retail marketing services for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association*

The taste can change depending on what the cattle have eaten, so Whisnant tries to finish her cows on the same pasture each time, for the sake of consistency. Grass-fed beef also tends to be less tender than grain-fed; to address that, Whisnant tenderizes some of her family cuts with a non-chemical tenderizing process.

There is also a price difference for the product; in Schmidt's store, grass-fed beef is 30 to 50 percent more expensive than conventional beef. That makes it cost more than natural beef, which is 15 to 20 percent higher, but less than organic. Some of his customers have switched from organic, Schmidt says, and sales of grass-fed beef are growing each month.

That growing interest is what suppliers like Harris are counting on, and he sees evidence of it not only in natural food stores, but in the grocery stores he's been visiting.

"I can't tell you how many times when I'm in Publix doing the demonstrations, people say, 'Oh, they carry this here now? That means I won't have to go to the store down the street for my beef,'" Harris says. "It keeps that high-income, sought-after shopper in their store."