

Organic Beef — Natural Meat Steaks Its Claim

By Sharon Palmer, RD

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Home, home on the range

Where the cattle and livestock graze

Where seldom is heard an unnatural word

And the cows eat grass all their days

Driving up the long, dusty route through central California, you will spot conventional cattle farms that span for miles with thousands of cattle wedged into feedlots, doused with enormous sprinklers during the sweltering midday heat. The stench will follow you for miles. But as the route winds through the valley, rustic country farms dot the landscape where cattle graze serenely beneath hundred-year-old oaks on the rolling, golden California hills.

Farther north in the Point Reyes National Seashore in northern California, you will find one such ranch called Marin Sun Farms. With seven properties in Marin and southern Sonoma counties, Marin Sun Farms manages 3,500 acres with 300 yearling beef and 400 mother cows to provide a local source of humanely raised, 100% grass-fed beef, free of artificial growth hormones and antibiotics. With 2,083 acres of certified organic pastures, Marin Sun Farms seeks to restore, conserve, and maintain the productivity of their lands through holistic ranching practices. The mild climate and rich soil support a variety of native grasses upon which the livestock graze in open space for their entire life. The livestock select their diet naturally from the pastures as they graze, reminiscent of the natural herds that once roamed America's vast open land.

Marin Sun Farms is just one of the many new-age farms that have forever changed the landscape of American ranching. Helped by the wild success of Niman Ranch, the legendary network of independent family farms with the slogan "raised with care," these farms are supplying concerned consumers with a healthier and more humane final product.

Meat Times, They Are a-Changin'

Today, the demand for natural, organic, and grass-fed beef is through the roof. Increasingly more consumers are interested in how that neat little piece of meat got on the styrofoam tray, asking questions about how the animal was cared for, kept, and fed. This trend received a kick-start by star chefs proclaiming the name of a particular meat ranch right on the menu. While natural markets were the primary domain of these specialty meats in retail sales, they are now more widely available in supermarkets, club stores, and online shopping venues. Safeway recently introduced organic beef in 240 of its 1,700 California stores.

Some major factors pushing consumers toward an alternative meat supply include concerns over antibiotics, growth hormones, and other drugs in meats. People are also pursuing meat of livestock that feed on non-genetically engineered feed and pastures without animal parts as a safeguard against mad cow disease or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). Consumers even want to know that animals are treated humanely and provided plenty of wide open space, without a cage or feedlot in sight. They care about how the farm is managed and whether the practices are eco-friendly—from the management of manure to how much fossil fuel is used. Many of today's consumers want to support local farms in their community, calling themselves "locovores." Respondents to a national survey cited health and nutrition (66%), taste (38%), food safety (30%), and the environment (26%) as motivational factors behind organic food purchases.¹

Such consumer desire has fed into the organic meat boom, making organic meat the fastest-growing segment of the organic industry. According to Organic Monitor, a business research and consulting company, organic meat

sales in the United States have expanded more than 150% since 2002, with high growth rates expected to continue as retail distribution increases. During the past five years, more than 1,000 U.S. ranchers have switched herd to an all-grass diet. This new movement has given small, local farms a method of distinguishing themselves from the masses and revitalizing their operations.

“It is true: Organic meats are in demand. But the penetration is very young; it is 1% of the meat sales in the U.S. I predict it will continue to be fast in growth over the next five years,” says Wende Elliott, founding organic farmer of Wholesome Harvest, based in Colo, Iowa. Elliott was an organic consumer living in a large city. Due to her concern about how her family’s meat supply was raised, she decided to move to Iowa and raise it herself. Today, Elliott is the president of Wholesome Harvest, a coalition of many small farms that can boast that their animals live on a pasture-based system with an organic feature; a commitment to nutrition, fair trade, food safety, and food quality; and full traceability of their meat products. She was awarded the Excellence in Agricultural Award from the Iowa Farm Bureau in 2004, the first woman and first organic farmer to receive the award.

Mary Jo Forbord, RD, executive director of Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, notes that a move to local foods has spawned to college campuses. Among a generation that recognizes the cold, hard fact that they may not outlive their parents, a renaissance of exploring healthier lifestyles has taken root. These days, college campuses host foodservice operations that use local foods, sponsor organic gardens, and rely on grass-fed beef and source-identified foods.

Back to the Future on the Ranch

With a new focus on agricultural practices, some ranches are returning to old-fashioned models of raising animals. “There are two models. In the industrial model, the cattle leave the ranch and go to a feedlot before they are slaughtered. In the grass-fed model, after weaning we send them to another pasture on the ranch to spend the rest of their life,” says Mike Gale, owner of Chileno Valley Natural Beef, a family ranch in Marin County dedicated to grain-free feeding that doesn’t use antibiotics or hormones.

“I grew up on my family’s ranch in the Point Reyes National Seashore. After college, I was looking to create a new ranching company of my own based on the principles of sustainability—grass-fed, solar energy-collecting ruminants. I was told by everyone in the industry that it could not be done. Great-tasting, grass-fed beef without corn—was I crazy? I have [accomplished] and continue to accomplish all of my goals,” says David Evans, owner of Marin Sun Farms. He is working to certify the rest of the land and animals as organic, a process that will likely take up to five years to complete.

The grass-fed ranching movement seems to be sweeping across America. A June article in Time explored the grass-fed revolution, in which beef is raised wholly on pasture rather than grain-fed in feedlots, citing that it was only after World War II that the United States began confining cattle to industrial farms to be fattened on high-calorie grain diets, a system that grew to match the surpluses of government-subsidized corn and soybeans. As a result, Americans have grown accustomed to the taste and uniformity of feed-lot beef instead of the grass-fed beef that was once the norm.

Beyond the Meat Labels

Though some consumers may be screaming for more natural sources of meat, they are often confused about what it actually is. If it is grass-fed, is it organic? Does organic meat come from a small farm? Which type of meat is best for me and my environment? Even experts are hard pressed to answer such questions.

“I get a lot of people [who] think organic beef is all grass-fed, which is not necessarily so,” says Amy Barr, RD, cofounder of Marr Barr Communications, a strategic marketing and communications agency specializing in food, nutrition, health, lifestyle, and sustainability. Elliott adds, “People think free range means pasture-fed. But it means that they’re not in a cage; it doesn’t mean they eat grass.”

It shouldn't be a surprise that organic meat is difficult to understand since the regulations for organic livestock are exhaustive, covering everything from gestation to pest management on the farm. "The organic regulations are so detailed from the farm to the dinner plate. They are thousands of pages long," adds Barr.

Elliott reports that the USDA prohibited organic meat until 2002, making it the last segment of organic foods to be legally marketable. Organic meat is beef, pork, or poultry that has been raised and processed according to strict guidelines. All certified organic meat is independently inspected and traced at every phase of production to ensure compliance with USDA National Organic Standards. Such standards include 100% certified organic feed with no animal by-products, no antibiotics, humane treatment, preventative health practices, and natural processing methods. Organic producers must be certified annually for compliance with organic standards to raise, feed, and process their livestock. Organically raised cattle must be tracked from birth to consumption.

The USDA also allows for claims such as "No Antibiotics," "No Hormones," and "Free Range." "Natural" meat products may be minimally processed and free of preservatives and additives. Whole Foods Market chooses to adhere to the most stringent animal welfare standards and definition of "natural meat" in the supermarket industry by selling only beef, chicken, pork, and lamb that adhere to its standards: no antibiotics; no added growth hormones; humane raising, transporting, and slaughter; no animal by-products in feed; and no more than one third of an animal's life can be spent on a feedlot.

And there is one more piece to the puzzle: grass-fed beef. Recently, the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) released a revised proposal for a grass-fed meat label claim for its process-verified labeling program. The revised standard, which applies to cattle, sheep, and other ruminant livestock (not pigs), requires that animals certified as grass-fed receive at least 99% of their lifetime energy source from a grass- or forage-based diet. This is an increase from the 2002 proposed amount of 80% of lifetime energy received from a grass- or forage-based diet. Meat products from livestock raised in accordance with the AMS grass-fed standard could be labeled with the grass-fed claim along with the "USDA Process Verified" statement and shield.

But it gets more confusing. "There are organic, natural, and grass-fed meats and they are mixed and matched and layered upon each other," says Barr. Some ranchers, like Elliott, are "beyond organic" as they work to exceed organic standards by also committing to the environment, family farmers, fair trade principles, revitalization of rural communities, and pasture-feeding animals.

Plenty of cottage industry farmers may not be certified organic but raise their livestock with similar principles. Some consumers find local meat sources more desirable than "big" organic ranches. Forbord, a fifth-generation farmer, and her family maintain a small 480-acre farm with roughly 90 cattle in western Minnesota. The Forbords' grazing lands are certified organic, but they have foregone certified organic labeling of their meats. "Pursuing a certified organic label would mean we would have to bypass our local custom processor. Working with our local community is more important to us than organic certification. We enjoy knowing our customers and they value knowing how we raise their food," says Forbord.

Gale has chosen to bypass organic certification for his Chileno Valley Natural Beef because he would have to use a certified organic slaughterhouse. "Our customers are more concerned about how the animals are handled rather than whether it is organic. There are nuances to these terms. If you think organic beef is the answer, it's not. They could be organic grain-fed beef. The buyer must beware," he says.

Holly Givens, communications director of the Organic Trade Association (OTA), reports that all organic ruminant species must have access to pasture and there has been some desire to make that more specific. As a result, the USDA and the National Organic Standards Board have been considering whether to make the standards more detailed.

Wrangling for a Healthier Ecosystem

While livestock producers have argued for years that organic ranching is impractical and near impossible, small farms across the country are proving them wrong. Traditional ranching is fossil fuel-dependent, but organic farms work in harmony with nature using sustainable practices. Forbord notes that at her farm, from the time the calf is born to the time it is processed, they use one half gallon of fossil fuel, a number that is going down. Supporting local farms also cuts down on “food miles,” the number of miles it takes to get food to the dinner plate.

“I have learned over many years as a farmer that nutrition starts with a balance of nutrients in the soil, feeding a great diversity of plants on the landscape. Where I live, the diversity of plants combined with herd of buffalo and fire formed the tallgrass prairie ecosystem,” says Forbord.

“People care about the nourishment of their bodies. They want to be healthy and they want to live sustainably. They do not want to contribute to environmental degradation. They want to support small business and a meaningful community,” says Evans, whose goal is to make the land productive for generations to come and help support a food system that supports its community. Marin Sun Farms products are not shipped out of state; instead, they are sold to local restaurants such as Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., and at local farmers’ markets.

Givens reports that having animals as part of the farm system is important because it closes the loop for farm fertility and the farm functions as a system. Managed manure handling is also important, and organic farmers are mandated to ensure that animal waste does not endanger the environment around them.

But Gary Weber, PhD, executive director of regulatory affairs for National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, points out, “Modern cattle production methods actually decrease the amount of inputs necessary to produce the level of beef to meet the needs of consumers worldwide for U.S. beef. If U.S. cattle producers were to attempt to produce the current beef supply with 1955 technology, we would need a cattle herd about 80% larger than that of today.”

Meat Going to Market

The logistics of supplying customers with meat from small farms are not simple. Many small farms will not ship meat as a commitment to support the local food system and avoid further consumption of resources. Coalitions such as Wholesome Harvest, with its network of more than 40 small family farms, pose a solution to distribution.

Organic, grass-fed, and natural meats are becoming more widely available in supermarkets. Elliott notes that her organic meat products even reach hospitals and schools, reporting that SYSCO is getting in on the organic meat act by piloting a program through Wholesome Harvest that connects customers with local meat sources.

But there is also concern for the economic realities of these meats. Organic, grass-fed, and natural meats have been called “meat for the rich,” as the price is significantly higher than conventionally raised meat. According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, prices for all beef products offered in retail supermarkets average \$3.56 per pound compared with natural and organic beef products, which average \$5.19 per pound. “We keep them longer than in industrial ranching and we incur more risk and expense since we don’t use antibiotics. So we have to charge more,” says Gale.

Is It Healthier Than Conventional?

People are also flocking to natural, organic, and grass-fed meats with health in mind. One primary public concern so widely touted in the media is the potential for BSE. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, BSE possibly originated as a result of the feeding of scrapie-containing sheep meat-and-bone meal to cattle. There is strong evidence that the BSE outbreak was amplified and spread throughout the United Kingdom cattle industry by feeding rendered bovine meat-and-bone meal to young calves.

Growth-promoting hormones have been used by the beef industry for more than 30 years to improve an animal’s ability to more efficiently utilize nutrients and produce leaner, more affordable beef. Numerous scientific bodies

and regulatory agencies have concluded that the use of hormones in beef production is safe. But critics express concern over the potential health impact of hormones in meat production and the negative environmental impact of hormones entering waterways from livestock feedlots.

And what about all those antibiotics given to livestock? “Routine use of antibiotics in food production is an inappropriate and wasteful use of antibiotics. Antibiotic resistance is a pressing concern for everyone,” says Forbord. According to The Ohio State University Extension, cattle in 83% of U.S. commercial feedlots routinely receive antibiotics for disease prevention and growth promotion during the finishing period. This practice has been linked to the development of resistant bacteria, which can be transmitted through food and sicken people with infections that are more difficult or impossible to treat with those same antibiotics.² In June 2001, the American Medical Association adopted a resolution opposing nontherapeutic use of antimicrobials in animal agriculture. But the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association stresses that the U.S. government mandates that no beef with antibiotic residues that exceed FDA standards will be allowed in the food supply.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicates grass-fed beef might be healthier than conventional beef. According to a recent literature review of value-added nutrients found in grass-fed beef products conducted by the College of Agriculture, California State University in Chico, and the University of California Cooperative Extension Service, researchers found that cattle feed or the composition of the ration has a significant effect on the fatty acid profile of the final beef product. In addition, they noted that the research to date would support the argument that grass-fed beef is higher in vitamins A and E, conjugated linoleic acid, and omega-3 fatty acids when lipids are compared on a gram of fatty acid/gram of lipid basis. In general, grass-fed cattle are slaughtered at lighter weights than grain-fed beef, producing leaner, lower fat carcasses overall, thus having an overall lower percentage of fat and higher portion of favorable unsaturated fatty acids.³

What Dietitians Need to Know

While in the past dietitians typically reined in their nutrition advice to safe territory, they now find themselves bombarded with questions ranging from the nutritional facts about artisan products to the benefits of sustainable, local foods. Not only might dietitians be pressed upon to discuss these issues with the public, but they may also need to have a better understanding of the food system—from the soil to the plate. After all, the organic and local food movement appears to be here to stay. Givens reports that for its 20th anniversary in 2005, the OTA surveyed industry research organizations and long-time member companies to ask them to envision the organic industry in the year 2025, adding, “Their responses predicted that organic products would be commonplace and would be sold anywhere and everywhere by 2025.”

“Dietitians are becoming more comfortable with exploring what happens to food before it arrives in the grocery store,” says Forbord. “We must continually enhance our knowledge of food systems to maintain our position as the food and nutrition experts. Our clients and patients are making food choices for reasons beyond nutrient content. To maintain credibility, we need to increase our understanding of the deeper values that are mirrored by food choices. If we are up to the challenge, dietitians will have a vital role to play in emerging food systems.”

— Sharon Palmer, RD, is a contributing editor at *Today’s Dietitian* and a freelance food and nutrition writer in southern California.

Source - <http://www.todaysdietitian.com/coverstory.shtml>

USDA Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms

- **Certified:** The term certified implies that the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Agriculture Marketing Service have officially evaluated a meat product for class, grade, or other quality characteristics (eg, “Certified Angus Beef”).

- Free range or free roaming: Producers must demonstrate to the agency that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside.
- Natural: A product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and that is only minimally processed (a process that does not fundamentally alter the raw product) may be labeled natural. The label must explain the use of the term natural (such as no added colorings or artificial ingredients; minimally processed).
- No hormones (pork or poultry): Hormones are not allowed in raising hogs or poultry. Therefore, the claim “no hormones added” cannot be used on the labels of pork or poultry unless it is followed by a statement that says, “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.”
- No hormones (beef): The phrase no hormones administered may be approved for use on the label of beef products if sufficient documentation is provided to the agency by the producer showing no hormones have been used in raising the animals.
- No antibiotics (red meat and poultry): The phrase no antibiotics added may be used on labels for meat or poultry products if sufficient documentation is provided by the producer to the agency demonstrating that the animals were raised without antibiotics.
- Organic: The term organic may only be used on labels and in labeling of raw or processed agricultural products, including ingredients, that have been produced and handled in accordance with the [regulations](#).

— Source: USDA

References

1. Clause R. Iowa State University Extension, [Organic Beef Profile](#); May 2006.
2. Espinoza M. Food Safety of ‘Organic,’ [Conventional Beef Not So Different](#), Ohio State Study Finds. The Ohio State University Extension; October 26, 2004.
3. Daley C, Abbott A, Doyle P, et al. [A Literature Review of the Value-Added Nutrients found in Grass-fed Beef Products](#); June 2006 In Press (Nutrition Journal).

Resources

[Chefs Collaborative](#)

[Greener Pastures](#)

[Hunger and Environmental Nutrition Dietary Practice Group of the American Dietetic Association](#)

[National Cattlemen’s Beef Association](#)

[Organic Farming Research Foundation](#)

[Organic Trade Association](#)

[Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#)

[USDA National Organic Program Standards](#)

Find a local farm for natural, organic, or grass-fed meat:

[Eatwild](#)

[Eco-Labels](#)

[Food Routes](#)

[North Star Neighbors](#)

[Organic Valley Family of Farms](#)

[Wholesome Harvest](#)