You Are What Your Animals Eat

By Jo Robinson

In my investigation into pasture-based farming, I've stumbled upon an alarming void: few people care about the link between the diet of our livestock and the nutritional content of their products. "Feed animals anything you want," the research suggests, "and it makes no difference to their meat, milk, or eggs."

Browse through the animal science journals, for example, and you'll see that the goal of most feeding experiments is to increase production and minimize costs. Period. As long as the feed is cheap and the animal gets fat, anything goes. Here's a glaring example. A 1999 study published in The Journal of Animal Science explored the desirability of feeding stale chewing gum and its wrappers to cattle. Wonder of wonders, the article concluded that a bubble gum diet was a net benefit. I quote: 'Results of both experiments suggest that [gum/packaging material] may be fed to safely replace up to 30% of corn-alfalfa hay diets for growing steers with advantages in improving dry matter intake and digestibility.' In other words, feed a steer a diet that is 30 percent bubble gum and wrappers, and he'll eat more. Needless to say, there was no mention of the nutritional value of the resulting meat. (When I first read these articles, I assumed that no one would actually feed bubblegum to their animals, despite the "positive" results of the studies. Then a professor of animal science drove me by a Beechnut gum factory in upstate New York where dairy farmers used to buy truckloads of bubblegum to feed to their cows. The only reason the practice stopped is that the factory closed down.)

Researchers studying human nutrition have been just as slow to see the connection between animal diets and human diets. To most dieticians, beef is beef, eggs are eggs, and milk is milk. Few pay any attention to what the animals were fed or how they were raised. Thus, when the USDA guidelines say 'eat less red meat,' the edict applies to all red meat, whether it's a fatty steak from a grainfed cow, or a lean steak from a grassfed cow with its invisible bounty of omega-3s, vitamin E, and CLA. I have spent the past three years trying to connect the dots between animal feed and human food. It's been arduous work. For the past 50 or so years, virtually all our information about the nutritional value of meat, eggs, and dairy products has come from grainfed animals. To discover the nutritional value of grassfed products, I've had to search through moldy journals published before the advent of factory farming, extrapolate from small studies financed by individual farmers, and rely on studies based in Ireland, Australia, or New Zealand; parts of the world where pasture-based farming still survives.

Finding the amount of vitamin E in grassfed beef has been my biggest challenge. I began to search for this data as soon as I learned that grass has 20 times more vitamin E than corn or soy. Given the magnitude of this difference, I reasoned that meat from grassfed animals must have an extra helping of vitamin E. Diligently, I searched the scientific record. At long last, I located one study that compared the amount of vitamin E in grainfed and grassfed meat. The impetus for the study came from disgruntled Japanese buyers who complained that the meat from American feedlot cattle spoiled more quickly than the meat from Australian free-range cattle. To find out why, the Americans decided to measure the vitamin E levels in the two types of meat. (Antioxidants such as vitamin E are known to prolong shelf life.) Their tests reed that meat from grassfed cattle has three to four times more vitamin E than meat from feedlot cattle. How did they use this data? They decided to add more artificial vitamin E to feedlot diets.

What can be done about the lack of interest in raising animals in a more natural environment? The underlying problem is that most of our animal research is funded by commercial interests--- primarily the grain, chemical, pharmaceutical, farm equipment, and meat-packing companies. Together, these vertically integrated behemoths have a multi-billion dollar investment in perpetuating factory farming. The USDA, meanwhile, devotes the bulk of its effort to supporting and tweaking the feedlot system. It is more willing to spend $100,000 on a new piece of equipment designed to measure the odor that wafts off manure lagoons than to spend a similar amount on exploring the odor-free grazing system. What will it take to rearrange the priorities of the USDA? An enlightened public. And what will it take to enlighten the public? A sustained media campaign. But since there is no money to

fund such a campaign, the breakthrough will have to come from investigative journalism. A journalist from a major TV show such as "60 minutes" or "Dateline" or a prestigious newspaper such as The New York Times or The Washington Post will decide to explore the stunning differences between raising animals on pasture and in confinement. Building on this ground-breaking work, Bill Moyers or another respected TV journalist, will produce a one-hour documentary on pasture-based farming. The program will conclude---as it must---that raising animals on pasture is better for consumers, animal welfare, the environment, and small-scale farmers. Before long, dozens of TV shows, newspapers, and magazines will have followed suit and launched their own investigations into the new phenomenon.

All of a sudden, grassfarming will be the talk of the town. Serving organic meat won?t win points in Los Angeles anymore unless it's grassfed as well. Meanwhile, Ted Turner will have stopped sending all of his bison calves to feedlots to be fattened like cattle, and by 2005, his 'Turner Reserve Grassfed Bison' will be the thing to serve at celebrity gatherings. Propelled by this groundswell of interest, investors and institutions will finally devote more time, money and energy to supporting pasture-based farming.

Will grassfarming really become the darling of the media? Only time will tell. But even if it doesn't, there is evidence that grassfarming is gathering momentum the old fashioned way? word of mouth. Friends are telling friends about the health benefits of pastured animal products, and they're turning the curious into converts by inviting them over to share in a feast. I've gotten calls from quite a few grassfarmers this year who say they're having trouble keeping up with demand. The good news about grassfarming seems to be spreading---one satisfied customer at a time!

Jo Robinson is a New York Times bestselling writer. To purchase her 128-page book, Why Grassfed Is Best! go to www.eatwild.com