

a legitimate beef

boning up on today's meat labeling

Resources

USDA National Organic Program
www.ams.usda.gov/nop

American Grassfed Association
www.americangrassfed.org

Animal Welfare Institute
www.awionline.org

Certified Humane, Raised & Handled
www.certifiedhumane.org

Food Alliance
www.foodalliance.org

Husbandry Institute
www.husbandryinstitute.org

Organic Trade Association
www.ota.com

Wild Farm Alliance
www.wildfarmalliance.org

Producers and Suppliers

Niman Ranch
www.nimanranch.com

Organic Prairie
www.organicprairie.com

Thundering Hooves
www.thunderinghooves.net

Country of Origin Labeling

The USDA's country of origin labeling (COOL) program promised to label beef, lamb, pork, fish, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables and peanuts with their country of origin. Although the program was supposed to be implemented in 2004, it has not gone into effect yet, except with regards to seafood, for which COOL labeling became mandatory in April 2005. Mandatory COOL labeling for other commodities is currently scheduled to go into full effect September 30, 2006.

Chef Ian Troxler of Lone Mountain Ranch, near Yellowstone Park in Montana, is one of a growing number of chefs who buys certified organic beef directly from a local ranch. "During the mad-cow scare in 2003, I was able to talk to my rancher about the origin of his stock and see how they are being fed and handled," he says. "I could walk into my dining room and tell my guests that I had seen where and how my meat was raised."

Chef Troxler agrees this is a luxury most chefs don't have. Of course, chefs are concerned with the flavor, tenderness and cost of the meat they serve, but many are also concerned with questions of environmental sustainability, large-scale meat production and humane animal treatment. Although the number of chefs who buy directly from the source is growing, and more and more are learning first-hand how the meat they cook is raised, the reality is that most meat is purchased from larger suppliers. So chefs are left with the challenge of understanding the meaning of the different labeling terms—*all-natural*, *certified organic*, *grass-fed*, *grain-fed*, *pasture-finished*—and the tastes and textures they imply. Here, we hope to lay out the different options available and offer you the information necessary to make informed choices in your own kitchens.

A Meat Terminology Primer

All-Natural: The term 'natural' may be the most confusing of all. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), a 'natural' or 'all-natural' labeling on meat means that it has been "minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients," but does not prohibit growth-promoting hormones or antibiotics.

Grain-fed/Corn-fed: Although there is no official definition, this term describes the usual process of large-scale beef production, during which cattle are fed a diet of "specially formulated feed, based on corn or other grains," according to the USDA. This diet can also include molasses, cottonseed, and protein supplements (see *Animal by-products*). Grain-fed beef tends to contain more marbling (fat distributed throughout the muscle) than grass-fed beef, and have a more buttery flavor.

Grass-fed: According to the **American Grassfed Association (AGA)'s 100% Grassfed Ruminant Program**, a grass-fed cow must eat only herbaceous plants and/or mother's milk during its entire life cycle. The natural diet of cattle, grass is lower in saturated fats and higher in essential nutrients, therefore creating a healthier, leaner product. To be certified by the AGA, animals must not be administered any antibiotics or hormones (other than naturally occurring in grass-fed forage) at any time during their lifetime.

While all beef starts out consuming mother's milk and then grass, most beef is then 'finished' (grown to a desired size and weight) on a diet of grain. But some cattle are fed grass for the last few months of their life to create the darker colored meat (see *Pasture-finished*). Grass-fed beef tends to cook faster than grain-fed because it has less fat. Chef Danielle Custer of Bon Appetit Management Company at the Seattle Art Museum, says that grass-fed "tastes more like beef," but in preparation, it is "important to not salt it until just before use, and not to render the fat too well."

Pasture-finished: **Thundering Hooves**, a ranch in Eastern Washington, produces cattle, lambs and goats that are fed only in certified organic pastures of grass and alfalfa, and describe these animals as 'pasture-finished.' They receive no grain, nor do they spend time in feedlots or confinement facilities. The AGA, however, distinguishes between grass-fed, (never fed a diet of grain, only grass and herbaceous plants) and 'pasture-finished' which they define as an animal that has spent a certain amount of time before slaughter eating grass, although it might have eaten a grain diet for most of its life.

In general, grass-fed beef is darker in color, more robust in texture and stronger in flavor than grain-fed. The taste can also differ from region to region, depending on the types of forage the cow consumes.

(continued)

Grain-fed or milk-fed veal: Both milk fed and grain fed veal are male (bull) dairy calves. Most milk-fed veal calves are raised in crates and fed a completely liquid diet without access to solid food or water. As a result of this milk-based diet, the animal becomes anemic and the meat is light pink in color, with a mild taste and soft texture. Grain fed veal is redder in color and has a similar taste to beef but not as strong. These calves are fed a milk-based diet for their first six to eight weeks after which a corn and protein supplement are gradually introduced to their diet. With grain-fed veal, alternatives to crate confinement are sometimes used, such as dairy calf hutches, group pens or pasture rearing.

Animal by-products: The USDA banned the use of mammalian bone meal in animal feed in 1997, but still allows such questionable ingredients as chicken feathers, chicken manure and fishmeal to be added to the feed of livestock as protein supplements.

Antibiotics: Therapeutic antibiotics are used for the treatment of sick or injured animals. **Sub-therapeutic antibiotics** are lower levels of antibiotics than would be used to treat an infection, and are used as growth promoters for livestock.

Predator friendly: The Wild Farm Alliance promotes the idea of “wild farming,” or working with the environment and the natural tendencies of animals, insects, plants, etc. to create farming situations that “nourish healthy human communities and help safeguard natural communities.” One example of wild farming is using guard animals such as llama to protect flocks of sheep, rather than hunting predators to the point of local extinction.

Family vs. Factory Farms: The Husbandry Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the humane treatment of animals, defines a ‘family farm’ as a farm with less than 1,000 animal units, owned and operated by blood-related family members. A ‘factory farm,’ or large farming operation, is defined by federal and some state statutes as a facility that contains at least 1,000 animal units.

Understanding Certifications

To understand how labels help you choose the best meat product, reviewing the **USDA’s Certified Organic Program** is another good step to take. The USDA’s organic rule and guidelines state that in order to be labeled organic, cattle, pigs and sheep must: 1) not be fed any rendered animal by-products; 2) must be traced through their life cycle, 3) must not be fed antibiotics or growth hormones and; 4) must be allowed to engage in natural behaviors, such as seasonal access to pasture.

In addition to the USDA's organic program guidelines, other nonprofit organizations have set up their own protocols that extend and help to clarify the USDA standards for meat production.

Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) is a nonprofit organization created to offer a certification and labeling program for meat, eggs, dairy and poultry products from animals raised according to Humane Farm Animal Care’s Animal Care Standards. **The Certified Humane, Raised & Handled** program HFAC has created has three main points (although the full standards are more detailed and the process rigorous): 1) allowing animals to engage in their natural behaviors; 2) raising animals with sufficient space, shelter and gentle handling to limit stress; and 3) making sure they have ample fresh water and a healthy diet without added antibiotics or hormones.

The Food Alliance has both ‘fixed’ standards—which specifically prohibit the use of feed additives or sub-therapeutic antibiotics, growth hormones and genetically modified stock—and ‘scored’ standards, which focus on more particular practices such as feed production, pasture management, manure management and animal pest management. **The Animal Welfare Institute** has also set up operational standards called the **Humane Husbandry Criteria** that farmers who produce meat for companies such as Niman Ranch voluntarily implement, in order to receive the AWI certification.

Choosing for the Future

Chef Troxler and many chefs agree that it is important to find out what works for your customers and your business. While many chefs are moving toward the use of certified organic, grass-fed and other alternatives to large-scale beef sources, they also want to continue to educate their guests about what these terms mean and find the highest quality beef, lamb and pork, produced as close to home as possible. The stricter certifications created by independent organizations also reveal a growing commitment among ranchers, meat producers, chefs and consumers to take the USDA organic standard to the next level of humane and sustainable practices, bringing both peace of mind, and a higher level of quality and taste on the plate.

Scale: Asking the Right Questions

Beef comes from such a large animal, requiring a lot of space to produce, that it can be difficult to find alternatives to beef produced in large-scale facilities. Nevertheless, a sense of security like Chef Troxler describes can be achieved through establishing a strong relationship with your meat supplier, asking questions and if possible arranging at least one visit in your search for alternative sources.

Niman Ranch, an Oakland, California company with small partner farms throughout the Midwest, sells sustainably raised beef, pork and lamb. Mike McConnell, vice chairman of Niman Ranch, suggests asking questions about individual producer practices. "If a label reads grass-fed, ask how long that animal ate grass—two weeks or six months before slaughter? On large-scale farms, are animals raised in confinement barns, on slotted floors for liquid manure systems, or are they allowed access to pasture?" Even if your purveyor doesn't always have immediate answers for you, the dialogue lets producers know what you desire from your product.

Other References

The Ontario Veal Association
www.ontarioveal.on.ca/all_about_veal/vealquestions.html

The Humane Society
www.hsus.org/farm_animals/factory_farms/veal/veal_fact_sheet.html

"ParsingPork," Mike McConnell,
The Husbandry Institute.

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