



A Meat Terminology Primer for Consumers

Grain-fed -- The animal was fed grain at some point, probably in the last few months of life. This could be in a large CAFO or on a small family farm. If an animal has EVER consumed corn, soy, brewers grain, or other grain-based feeds, the meat can't be labeled grassfed.

Grassfed -- A USDA term that means the ruminant animal (beef, sheep, bison, or goat) has been fed nothing but grass from weaning to harvest. The term doesn't guarantee, however, that the animal wasn't given antibiotics or hormones at some point, and it also doesn't necessarily mean the animal was raised without some confinement. Meat labeled grassfed may be imported from other countries. This term has legal standing, and to use it as a marketing claim or on a label, the producer has to be sure the animals were raised in accordance with the rule.

One note: Poultry and pork are omnivores and typically require more than grass feeding to be healthy. At this point, there isn't any accepted uniform terminology for poultry and pork raised on pasture. However, Animal Welfare Approved offers certification to small family farms who meet their standards for humane production practices, including pasture.

AGA-Certified Grassfed -- A term that takes the USDA standards to a higher level. AGA certification is a third party audit system with strict standards to insure the animal has eaten nothing but grass from weaning to harvest, has not been confined, and has never been given antibiotics or hormones. AGA-certified grassfed also means that the meat is produced in the United States from beef cattle and other ruminants born and raised in this country.

Grass Finished -- This term has no legal meaning and is a self-made marketing claim. If an animal is grassfed, it is, by definition, grass finished, so there's no need to claim "grassfed and grass finished." The term by itself on a label can mean anything, so it's up to the consumer to ask questions of the producer or seller.

Natural -- This USDA term applies to the finished product and means that it contains no artificial ingredients or added color and is only minimally processed. Minimal processing means that the product was processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product. The label must include a statement explaining the meaning of the term natural (such as "no artificial ingredients; minimally processed"). The term has nothing to do with how the animal was raised or fed.

Naturally-raised -- This is another USDA term with legal standing. It means that the animal has never been fed animal by-products, growth hormones, or antibiotics. The feed could be grain or grass, and the animal could be confined to a feedlot for a portion of its life.

Organic -- The USDA certifies organic production standards, which require that the livestock was raised without antibiotics or synthetic hormones; on feed that was vegetarian, pesticide- and herbicide-free, and contained no GMOs. Organic does not equal grassfed. A ranch with organic certification may feed its herd entirely on grass, but many also feed organic grains and grain by-products during periods of confinement. Conversely, many grassfed producers choose not to pursue organic certification, even though they follow organic standards in the production of their meats. With this label, the best thing to do is ask the farmer or research more about the brand.

Pasture Raised -- You may encounter this term in articles that use it as a general term for any animal that never sees confinement; however, when you see it on a label, it's another self-made claim with no legal definition or independent verification of production standards. This is another case in which you should ask plenty of questions.