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Corn-fed vs. grass-fed

Beef conference raises some interesting questions about what consumers want in their meat.

By Monica Eng
Tribune reporter

November 11, 2009

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Food enthusiasts brought their curiosity -- and some beefs about the cattle industry -- to the recent Greater Midwest Foodways Alliance conference on "Beef, From Plains to the Plate."

The three-day conference offered a demonstration of cutting up primal beef cuts, a tour of [Maxwell Street Market](#), a trip through the Culinary Curiosity exhibition at Kendall College and a visit to the culinary school at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

But it hit a full sizzle when a panel of representatives from the mainstream beef industry opened up a session to questions in a Kendall College auditorium.

One audience member asked speakers Steve Fogelsong, operator of a feedlot, and Ben Wileman, an expert in veterinary science, why conventionally bred cattle are crowded into feedlots and fed corn when critics contend that these practices promote the spread of disease, necessitate antibiotics and can

give the cows ulcers.

Fogelsong replied that cattle are kept in the feed lot because "the fields can be too muddy to graze." And Wileman explained, "We feed corn because the cattle metabolize it quickly."

The two sides never came to complete agreement, but they both conceded that studies show that American consumers "say they want juicy tender meat that is affordable," according to Wileman. And to breed large cattle at low prices, producers have to find the most economical ways of housing, feeding and medicating their cattle.

Corn feeding, they noted, was relatively cheap, made the cows fatten up quickly and created the tender, fattier meat Americans have grown to prefer. Still, most agreed that if consumers were willing to pay more for their beef, healthier types of feeding, housing and medicating the animals might be possible.

Some of these more expensive but, arguably, healthier practices were explored in a presentation about grass-fed beef by [Northwestern University's](#) Kathryn L. Heinze. Her presentation showed a growing demand for grass-fed beef and dairy fueled by the sustainable and organic movement. She said that consumers associated grass-fed with authenticity, sustainability and naturalness while equating conventional beef with the words "manipulated" and "exploitative."

Grass-fed, she said, started as a niche for family farmers who supplied to environment/health conscious connoisseurs. Today, though, it has grown to supply many Chicago area restaurants (including [Harry Caray's](#), [Prairie Grass Cafe](#), [Schubas' Harmony Grill](#), [Bistro Campagne](#), [Frontera Grill](#) and [North Pond Cafe](#)).

Attendees were treated to a taste test between grass-fed beef and corn-fed angus beef. The preference leaned toward angus, but many cited pros and cons for each.

Less controversial but no less interesting was Russell Lewis' presentation on the history of the Union Stock Yard. The Chicago History Museum's chief historian, Lewis explained that at one time, the stockyards held 21,000 cattle and 75,000 hogs.

Cold months used to be hog butchering season, but in the late 19th century, the stockyards created a refrigerated facility with blocks of ice. By 1870, pork producers were delighted to have an outlet for their meat all year round, Lewis said. The stockyards fed many nearby industries, like those for leather,

furniture, sporting goods, soaps, brushes and more. The stockyards were once home to both Wilson & Co., a meat firm, and Wilson Sporting Goods, using different parts of the animals. Today, the sports equipment division remains.

Despite the stench, the stockyards were a major tourist attraction, drawing international visitors and even children for tours, according to Lewis.

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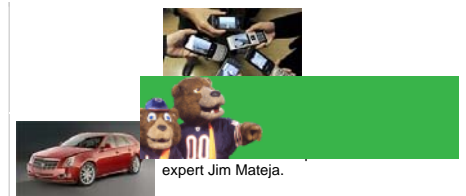
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