

# Grass-fed beef worth the wait for many

By Jane Snow Aug. 16, 2006  
McClatchy News Service

Akron, Ohio - Cattle graze peacefully on David and Deanna McMaken's farm near Waynesburg in Carroll County. From the time they're born until they become hamburger, the animals wander through pastures, munching grass and slowly gaining weight.

That's how cattle were raised a century ago, but rarely today, when most are weaned from grass at an early age and fattened on grains in feedlots. The McMakens' Rose Ridge Farm is one of a handful in Ohio producing grass-fed beef. But at the rate the industry is growing, you're going to be seeing a lot more of this meat.

Grass-fed beef became so popular with customers at Krieger's in the Akron, Ohio, area, that it's now the only kind the market sells.

"They say they like it better," Krieger meat cutter Rob Fink said.

The beef is touted as a wonder meat that's up to 50 percent lower in fat than regular beef, higher in vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids, environmentally friendly and humanely produced. Some researchers even claim it can help prevent cancer and help you lose weight.

Some of the nutrition claims may be premature, but the meat is indeed more healthful than regular beef, experts say. It's also tougher and some of it is less flavorful than regular beef, although farmers are working on that.

Grass-fed beef is just a tiny part of the \$78 billion U.S. beef industry, but it's growing at breakneck speed. Although the grass-fed industry is so new that no figures have been collected, estimates place the current market share at 3 percent, said Patricia Whisnant, president of the American Grassfed Association. Some industry insiders predict the market share will grow to 10 percent in the next 10 years, Whisnant said.

"It's still small but it's increased in a very large way," she said, noting that in just five years, the number of producers selling grass-fed beef through the Internet has grown from about 40 to more than 1,000.

The grass-fed beef on the market has increased to such an extent that the U.S. Department of agriculture has proposed labeling rules. A revised version of the original version was put forward in May and is expected to become law in mid-August.

The modern grass-fed beef industry is less than five years old, Whisnant said. Its growth was spurred by E. coli outbreaks in the 1990s that were traced to ground beef, and consumer concerns about mad cow disease and the use of antibiotics and growth hormones in beef production. Most -- if not all -- grass-fed beef is free of hormones and antibiotics.

"People began to say, 'whoa'. They began looking at food safety in our society," Whisnant said.

Health reasons also fueled the popularity of grass-fed beef. Those worried about heart disease have turned to it because it has less fat, including artery-clogging saturated fat, than regular beef.

The reason the beef is not stocked in every supermarket already is that production is slow and tedious.

"It's extremely difficult to produce," Deanna McMaken said. "It's just a lot easier to do on corn."

In standard beef operations, steers are fattened for most of their lives on a feed lot, where they are confined and trough-fed a rich diet of grains. They are given hormones to make them grow faster and antibiotics to counter any illnesses caused by the rich diet. Most reach the average slaughter weight of 1,200 pounds in 14 to 16 months.

Grass-fed animals are allowed to roam free in pastures (and in fact are herded by helicopter in Australia, one of the major producers of grass-fed beef). They are not fattened on grains in feed lots, nor given growth hormones to speed the process. McMaken's animals take more than two years to reach slaughter weight.

But the wait is worth it to producers such as McMaken, whose beef is snapped up by consumers who want the pleasure of beef without the health drawbacks.

In addition to having significantly less fat and cholesterol than regular beef, grass-fed beef has up to twice the amount of omega-3 fatty acids as regular beef, and a more healthful balance between omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, according to a review of research by the Grass-Fed Beef project at California State University's Chico Department of Agriculture and the University of California Cooperative Extension. Omega-3 fatty acids are thought to help lower blood cholesterol levels and blood pressure, and a type of omega-3 present in grass-fed beef may help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia and depression. The proper balance between omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids may help reduce inflammatory disorders, according to the California project.

Grass-fed beef also has been found to have up to 10 times more vitamin A than regular beef, and up to three times as much vitamin E, according to a study cited by the California project.

Researchers also say grass-fed beef has up to five times the CLA -- conjugated linoleic acid -- of regular beef. The substance is thought to help prevent cancer and regulate metabolism. In a Norway study of 108 people reported in the American Journal of Nutrition, those given CLA supplements lost more weight than those given placebos. The average weight loss was just 4 pounds, though.

Also, according to the California project, most studies base nutrient comparisons on the amount of nutrients found in lipids, or fat. Grass-fed beef may have more of certain nutrients per gram of fat, but overall the beef has much less fat than regular beef.

Another problem with nutrition claims for grass-fed beef is that the animals vary widely in composition. Because animals from different farms eat different varieties of grasses and enjoy different levels of exercise, grass-fed beef is not uniform in fat content, flavor, or -- presumably -- nutrition.

"Little work has been done to compare grass-fed cattle to grain-fed at a constant degree of fatness," the California project researchers concluded.

The composition and quality of grass-fed beef is gradually becoming more uniform, Whisnant said. In the past, some meat was almost gamey in flavor, while other meat was bland. That's still true to some extent.

As ranchers become more savvy about production techniques, that's changing, Whisnant said. At a tasting recently in Denver of meat from 22 different producers, chefs were impressed by the similar quality of the steaks.

"There were variations, but they were all very complimentary of how uniform the offerings were," said Whisnant, whose group staged the tasting at its annual conference.

Although the flavor can vary from animal to animal, all grass-fed beef is lean. That means it can be tough, although an Australian strip steak we tried was tender at medium-rare. Local grass-fed ground beef we tried was dry compared with regular ground beef.

Grass-fed beef cooks up to 30 percent faster than regular beef because it's so lean, according to the Grass-Fed Beef project. Educators recommend cooking steaks no more than medium to rare. Tough cuts such as chuck roast should be cooked at a lower temperature and for a longer time than regular beef.