

The logo for Organic Style, featuring the words "organic style" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The word "organic" is in a light grey color, and "style" is in a slightly darker grey. A small trademark symbol (TM) is located at the end of the word "style". The logo is set against a solid purple rectangular background.

The Better Beef Guide

Here's all you need to know about choosing the healthiest, best-tasting—and safest—cuts.

written by Tessa DeCarlo

If mad cow disease has you wondering whether eating a burger could turn you into a vegetable, we've got good news: There is plenty of safe, healthy, and great-tasting beef out there, if you know what to look for.

Sure, it was easier when the only choice you had to make at the meat counter was between prime rib and sirloin. Now you face choosing from natural, organic, hormone- and antibiotic-free, grass-fed, and grass-finished, along with conventionally raised beef. But, trust us, this label proliferation is great news for red-meat lovers, especially now that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad cow disease) has a foothold in this country's meat supply.

Even without the threat of BSE, there are plenty of reasons to think twice about conventionally raised beef. Factory-farmed cattle eat feed laced with hormones and antibiotics to fast-forward their growth, which in turn breeds superbacteria that are resistant to the antibiotics humans rely on. Although in 1997 the United States banned the practice of feeding cattle ground-up spinal tissue and brains from sick animals (which helps spread BSE), cattle still consume protein supplements that can contain beef blood, chicken feathers, and sometimes even manure. Overcrowded living conditions, sloppy slaughtering practices, haphazard inspections...you don't have to be an animal-rights activist to want to eat differently.

Which brings us back to the good news: All across the country, a new generation of ranchers is using old-fashioned methods such as pasture-feeding and the latest organic farming techniques to produce great-tasting, better-for-you beef. Yes, you might pay more (but we've got money-saving tips). Yes, you're going to have to do some taste tests (but

that will be fun!). And yes, we're going to tell you where to buy it, how to cook it, and exactly what to say the next time you're biting into a juicy burger and someone asks, "Are you sure you want to eat that?" Just keep reading.

When The Label Says: 100% Grass-Fed Or Pasture-Finished

What it means

Beef from animals that have spent their whole lives on pasture and are never fattened up with grain.

Grass-finished beef is what most people ate before industrial farming took over in the 1950s. Its fans say that grass is more natural and, therefore, better for the cattle, the environment, and your health. "When I eat grass-fed meat, I have a sense that I'm eating the kind of food I'm designed to eat," says Jo Robinson, creator of the Web site eatwild.com, which is devoted to pastured-raised meat, dairy, and poultry. She may be right: Grass-finished beef is usually lower in fat, calories, and omega-6 fatty acids linked to heart disease. It's also higher in vitamin E and heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. (But not that high: You'll get two to five times more omega-3 fatty acids from grass-fed beef than regular beef, but you'll get 5,000 percent more from salmon.)

The bottom line

Eating an occasional grass-finished steak won't make you much healthier, and locating a producer you like may require a few taste tests. But once you find a great grass-finished steak, you'll feel a whole lot better about eating beef.

LABEL LINGO

Be wary of labels reading simply grass-fed. Even factory-farmed cattle spend some time on pasture. Look for 100 percent grass-fed or pasture-finished instead.

So how does grass-fed taste? It depends on the season, the animal, and the skills of the farmer—especially since many of them are new to this kind of ranching. "You can get meat that's tough and tastes grassy," admits Robinson. When cattle graze freely, rather than eating what's put in their trough, it's simply harder to produce meat of consistent flavor. Still, when grass-finished beef *is* good, it's delicious—lean, tender, and juicy, with a robust taste that many beef lovers prefer. For some this helps justify prices, which can be triple that of supermarket meat.

When The Label Says: Natural

What it means

A huge range of things—it can simply mean that the beef hasn't been altered with food coloring or artificial additives, or that it was raised without the use of antibiotics, hormones, or animal proteins.

The price—and quality—of natural beef varies, and both usually correspond to how much special care a producer provides for the cattle. For example, Harris Ranch, in Selma, California, says that its natural beef, raised without hormones or rendered animal proteins, is free of antibiotic residues—but that doesn't mean the cows weren't ever fed the drugs. All beef producers who give their animals antibiotics stop doing so prior to slaughter to avoid antibiotic residue—the law mandates it. Because this kind of natural beef isn't substantially different from mass-produced beef, it's not that much more expensive.

Other producers take the "natural" claim further. Coleman Natural Meats in Denver, which raises 90,000 head of cattle each year, and Meyer Natural Angus, another large producer in Missoula, Montana, pledge that their animals receive no antibiotics, no hormones, and no animal by-products—ever. This translates into the consumption of more feed (without hormones and antibiotics, the cattle take longer to reach optimum weight) and higher management costs (producers must monitor animals more closely to keep them healthy). As a result, this kind of beef usually costs about 25 percent more than the regular supermarket variety.

At the most natural end of the spectrum are growers such as Bill Niman of Bolinas, California, who waits until cattle are 14 to 16 months old before moving them from grass to grain. (Most factory-farmed beef is switched at six months.) His animals receive shade while they're in the feedlot, sensitive handling at the slaughterhouse, and also eat no antibiotics, hormones, or animal by-products. But quality and good karma don't come cheap: Niman's meat is 30 to 100 percent pricier than what you'll find in the supermarket.

The bottom line

Most natural beef is grain-fed, producing a sweet, rich flavor that Americans have come to love. The best is free of frightening additives and more environmentally friendly than mainstream meat,

but it costs more. To make sure you're getting the degree of "natural" you want, look for producers' labels and brochures that give a lot of detail about how their cattle are raised.

When The Label Says: Organic

What it means

Beef raised on only organic feed (grain or grass) and with no antibiotics, hormones, or animal by-products. In addition, the animals have been provided with "natural living conditions," including access to pasture even during grain feeding.

The price of organic feed (a steer eats more than 30 pounds a day), plus the time and expense required for producers to meet USDA organic certification standards, make organic beef expensive—it will cost you three times more than supermarket beef. If you're a purist, you probably won't mind. "If I want to eat organic carrots," says Doug Wallace, who ran Green Circle Organics until it was purchased last year by Sunnyside Farms in Washington, Virginia, "why would I want to eat an animal that didn't eat organic grain?"

The bottom line

Of all beef labels, "organic" is the only one certified by the USDA, so you know what you're getting—and what you're not. Taste is another story: Like many artisanal products, organic meat varies in flavor. Looking for consistent quality? Start with beef sold under a brand name.

The Real Test: Taste

No matter which label you pick, you can find delicious meat. That's what our tasting panel (a food writer, a chef, and several just plain folks) discovered when we held a blind taste test at San Francisco's ACME Chophouse, where natural meat stars on the menu.

What we ate

Eight grilled rib-eyes. Three—from Waterfall Hollow Farm, Western Grasslands Beef, and American Grass Fed Beef—were grass-finished. Five were grain-finished, including an organic steak from Sunnyside Farms, a supermarket steak from Safeway, and natural steaks from Harris Ranch, Niman Ranch, and Golden Gate Meat Company.

SAVE BUCKS ON BEEF

Not ready to spring for organic or 100 percent grass-finished beef? Compromise with healthy—and cheaper—natural beef. Just be sure the label states that the animal hasn't been fed antibiotics, hormones, or animal by-products. To get the very best price, buy frozen steaks and large cuts in bulk (which you can

The winner

freeze later) from local producers.

The grass-finished steak from Waterfall Hollow Farm, a tiny company in Arkansas. "Mineral-y," "clean taste," "beefy," and "nicely chewy" were some of the tasters' comments. Of the other grass-finished steaks, the Western Grasslands Beef was tender and deliciously fatty, but the American Grass Fed Beef (the most expensive on the table, at almost \$25 a pound) was tough and not very flavorful.

Runner-up

The factory-farmed steak from Safeway—by far the cheapest—came in second, proving what every parent knows: People like what they usually eat.

Worth the difference?

No one could tell (by taste or texture) the grass-finished steaks from the grain-finished. All eight were at least okay, and many tasted great. The certified organic steak, from Sunnyside Farms, didn't stand out, but it won praise for its tenderness and "bright, lush" flavor.

Taking the lesson home

The next week my husband and I did a tasting in our own kitchen, sampling T-bones from Niman Ranch, a natural producer, and Western Grasslands Beef, an all-grass producer. Both steaks were delicious: I liked the grain-finished Niman beef's rounder, sweeter flavor; my husband preferred the more intense, complex taste of the pastured product.

We're both right, says Larry Bain, director of operations at ACME Chophouse. "One of the problems with the food business has always been the idea that there's only one way—one kind of potato, one way to produce meat. That's invariably going to create problems," he says. "I'd rather mix up what I eat and have Niman rib-eye one day and some grass-fed steak tartare the next."