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## Grass guzzlers

Written by Barbara E. Cohen

### **Grass-fed beef is best for human health, animal welfare, environment**

Although the grain-fed beef from confined animal feeding operations available in your local supermarket is U.S. Department of Agriculture-inspected, healthier alternatives exist. Carnivores concerned about their health, animal cruelty and the lasting impact of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations on the environment are going for grass-fed beef.

“When you eat grass-fed meat, you’re getting beef with benefits,” said Kate Clancy, a nutritionist and author of a 2006 nutritional report on grass-fed beef and dairy products by the Union of Concerned Scientists. “There are no losers in producing cattle entirely on pasture. Farmers win, consumers win, the environment wins and even the cattle win.”



Charolais and Red Angus cattle munch on grass at Lone Pine Farms. © Barbara Cohen

### **What’s your beef?**

Grass-fed cattle eat only hay and other herbaceous plants and their own mother’s milk throughout their life cycle. In contrast, confined animals may consume the flesh, hair, skin, hooves and blood of other cattle, manure and other animal waste, plastic pellets, drugs and chemicals, corn and other grains and still earn USDA approval.

Meat from pasture-raised cattle contains higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, especially alpha-linolenic acid, or ALA, and conjugated linoleic acid, or CLA, which have health benefits for consumers who choose these products, according to Greener Pastures, the Union of Concerned Scientists’ research project that compared fats in pastureraised and conventionally raised beef and dairy cattle.

In particular, the UCS’ researchers found that steak and ground beef from grass-fed cattle were almost always lower in total fat than comparable cuts from confinement-raised cattle. The report — subsequently endorsed by Consumer Union, publisher of Consumer Reports — concluded “the grass is truly greener when it comes to grass-fed beef and dairy.” By increasing the number of days their cows spend on pasture, farmers can increase the level of the omega-3 fatty acid ALA, which may reduce a person’s risk of fatal and acute heart attacks, and CLA, which may have a positive effect on a person’s ability to fight heart disease, cancer and immune system disease.

### **Where’s your beef?**

Eight Indiana farms are currently members of the American Grassfed Association, a trade organization

with more than 300 members that promotes the industry through research, marketing, public education and lobbying for regulatory changes in meat production and labeling ([www.americangrassfed.org](http://www.americangrassfed.org) ). The trade group has developed an industry-backed standard for certified grass-fed meat to be administered by Food Alliance, which promotes sustainable agriculture and comprehensive labeling. The association standard exceeds the requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's grass-fed standard, which allows for meat from cattle fed a forage diet to be labeled "grass-fed" even when the animals have been confined in feedlots and given antibiotics and growth hormones. The AGA standard is more restrictive for ruminants such as cattle, sheep and goats: total forage diet, no confinement, no antibiotics and no added hormones.

Look for AGA compliance to begin this summer. In Indiana, AGA member farms include the Apple Family Farm, McCordsville; Fiedler Family Farm, Rome; Hoosier Grassfed Beef, Attica; Lehman Bros. Farm, Freedom; Other Side of the Fence Farm, Huntingburg; Pathway Pastures, St. Joe; Seven Sons Meat Company, Roanoke; and the Swiss Connection, Clay City.

Consumers can find grass-fed meat from these producers at local farmers markets or at stores such as Edibles in Indianapolis or the Downtown Farm Stand in Muncie. Visit [www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com) for a list of additional Indiana farms selling grass-fed beef, pork, lamb, poultry and dairy — such as Traders Point Farm Organics or Lone Pine Farms, which supplies Moody Meats in Avon, Ladoga and the Indianapolis City Market.

### **Why grass-fed beef is gaining in popularity**

Although many people seek out grass-fed meat because of health or environmental concerns, they keep buying it because it tastes better. "No matter what it costs, people wouldn't continue to eat it if it didn't taste great," said Braydon Apple, of Apple Family Farm. You may also find the cost gap between grain- and grass-fed meats closing in the months ahead, due to the rising cost of corn for animal feed in CAFOs. "We haven't seen the price increases for grass-fed meats that consumers have seen in supermarkets," said Dave Ring, of Muncie's Downtown Farm Stand. Because animals grazing on open fields live longer and provide natural fertilizer, grass-fed meat is better for the animals' welfare and for farmland. The facts that it tastes better, is better for your health and costs about the same as meat from CAFOs should be reasons enough to join the grass-fed revolution.

### **For More Information:**

- The Great News About Grass, a 12-page booklet from Eating Fresh Publications, [www.eatingfresh.com](http://www.eatingfresh.com)
- Green Pastures, the nutritional report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, [www.ucsusa.org](http://www.ucsusa.org)
- American Grassfed Association, [www.americangrassfed.org](http://www.americangrassfed.org)
- Hoosier Grassfed Beef, [hoosiergrassfedbeef.com](http://hoosiergrassfedbeef.com)
- California State University, Chico, [www.csuchico.edu/agr/grassfedbeef](http://www.csuchico.edu/agr/grassfedbeef)

About the author: Barbara E. Cohen — who reuses, recycles and remodels in an energy-efficient bungalow in the Irvington historic district of Indianapolis — writes primarily about housing and interior design, the arts, cultural tourism and health care.