

Half Moon Bay Review

Grass-fed movement grows on South Coast

TomKat Ranch certified for sustainable beef

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TomKat Ranch in Pescadero was recently awarded certification for grazing cattle exclusively on grass and forage plants – the first milestone on the road to selling beef locally.

Ranch Manager Bob Stent says expanding operations into the meat department is a natural step for the ranch for two reasons. First, he's been employing a cadre of cattle for years as a "conservation tool" to keep the grass and forage in check. And second, Stent says he's caught wind of a regional buzz from buyers demanding grass-fed beef because of its alignment with sustainable farming practices. He wants in on the ground floor.

"Grass-fed fits right in (with the ranch's eco-friendly ethos). We got the cows, so we might as well try to do a nutritional product here and market it locally," Stent says. "It's the way that we want to go. We're just trying to do what's good for the land."

The ranch underwent a rigorous evaluation in May to earn the certification. Representatives from Food Alliance, a nonprofit organization that certifies farms, ranches and food handlers for sustainable practices, inspected ranch operations inside and out, making sure the land is free of chemicals and the cows are free-ranging and free of supplemental feeds and hormone and antibiotic treatments. TomKat Ranch is one of two establishments in California to receive the Food Alliance stamp of approval for grass-fed standards this year – the other is Hearst Ranch Beef on the Central Coast.

"I think it's really great," said San Mateo County Agriculture Commissioner Gail Raabe. According to 2007 data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, San Mateo County is home to 53 beef ranches and 2,419 head of cattle. Raabe says those figures might not paint an accurate picture of the county's beef industry given a shift marked by years of ranch subdivisions and buy-outs.

Raabe described a dissemination of cattle grazers and pastureland on the Coastside over the past two decades – "big changes in livestock operations" – that have changed the culture and landscape of the county. She calls the certification of TomKat Ranch and efforts on the part of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to preserve and reintroduce grazing "encouraging" and hopes others follow the TomKat lead.

Benefits of going grass-fed include less soil erosion, improved range grass production and healthier hamburgers, says Scott Exo, executive director for Food Alliance. Healthier hamburgers are also of benefit to consumers, TomKat Ranch Office Administrator Kathy Webster added.

Raabe and Exo both see "grass-fed" as a movement picking up momentum in California alongside "going green" and sustainability.

"Increasingly, as consumers have become more sensitized to the realities of the modern food system, they've become concerned that the techniques used to raise beef in North America are not in the best interest of the consumers. ... They're asking harder, more poignant questions about their food supply," Exo said. "For those folks looking for an alternative method of raising meat, they're thinking (grass-fed) is for them."

Stent said the ranch will start cranking out about 30 cows worth of beef in about a year.



Bob Stent encourages Kathy Webster to taste wild licorice in the Pescadero field where recently certified grass-fed beef are raised.