

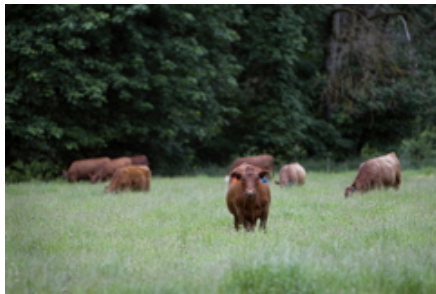


FOODday Impact - OregonLive.com

What's your beef?

Posted by Leslie Cole, The Oregonian February 17, 2009 00:05AM

Grass fed? Grain finished? Organic? Free-range? How do you know, and what does it mean?



Rob Finch/The Oregonian

When I read the press release, something didn't seem right: At a taste test conducted by Oregon State University, Portland elementary and middle school students compared hamburgers made from grass-fed beef and grain-fed beef. And there was no clear winner.

What? Two burgers, one from a grass-fed animal, the other -- perhaps more familiar to most kids -- from an animal fattened up on grain, and the kids didn't prefer one over the other? Maybe that's because they weren't really tasting grass-fed beef.

While the press release used the term grass-fed, it also talked about how the cattle ate grain for part of their lives. Seems the writer was a bit confused, as were the several news services that picked up the story and ran it without question. Does a muddle about a PR message really matter to anyone? Yes, indeed, because it's further evidence of the rampant confusion about so-called "green" food in the marketplace.

Plenty of consumers are looking for more healthful, responsibly raised beef and are willing to pay a premium for it, but they may not be buying what they think they're buying. Is it organic? Grass-fed? And do any of these "green" terms really mean that the cow led a happy life frolicking in a local farmer's field?

Thanks to confusing marketing terms, we might think we know, but often we don't.

The problem is this: Most labels are vague or oversimplified, and the terms are widely misunderstood. Restaurant menus and well-meaning butchers consistently make mistakes, which doesn't help.



Mike Davis/The Oregonian

The confusion certainly isn't slowing the growth of this segment of the beef market -- the brands touting "healthy practices" are booming these days. While "healthy" beef still is only about 3 percent of total U.S. beef sold, it's growing in volume and value by about 30 percent a year, including in Oregon.

Witness Country Natural Beef (formerly known as Oregon Country Beef), which started in 1986 with 14 eastern Oregon ranches and now encompasses more than 100 cattle ranching members as far away as New Mexico, Hawaii and North Dakota. Premium "natural" meat brands such as California's Niman Ranch have been so successful that stores including Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe's and New Seasons now offer similar house brands, which use the term "natural" on their labels ... implying something, but what?

"I think it comes down to the consumer understanding what they're purchasing," says Gabrielle Homer, an executive for Painted Hills Natural Beef in Fossil. "We want them to get what they want."

So do we. School is in session.

LESSON NO. 1

All beef is grass-fed, but very little is true "grass-fed beef."

That's because all cattle eat grass, at least for the first few months of life. But to call a steak "grass-fed" and comply with the American Grassfed Association and the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service's official definition, the animal must only eat mother's milk, grass or hay for its entire life. This takes more time, and more land, so relatively few folks are doing it.

By comparison, most U.S. mass-produced beef cattle leave the pasture by 6 months of age to live out their lives in a feed yard or feedlot, where they're fattened up quickly on high-calorie grain. So-called "naturally raised" beef is a hybrid: They spend more of their lives on the range, but at 14 months of age, they, too, head to a feedlot to eat grain for three to six months; this allows for more-marbled meat, producers say.

It's up to you to decide which you prefer, but here are three questions to ask if you want true grass-fed beef: Did the animal eat any grain? Was it 100 percent grass-fed? Was it grass-finished, or grain-finished (translation: What did it eat during those final months of fattening)?

LESSON NO. 2

Most grass-fed beef lives out its life on the range, but some goes to a feed yard (where it eats hay, not grain).

"The thing people want when they get grass-fed beef is that bucolic cow on green grass," says Carrie Oliver, whose Oliver Ranch Web site (www.oliverranch.com) is dedicated to preaching truths about

artisan beef and steering shoppers to top producers. "(A feed yard) is not necessarily bad," Oliver says. "It's just not what people expect."

LESSON NO. 3

"Natural" means nothing.

Love the idea of cattle romping in open pastures and munching on special, additive-free grains? "Natural" doesn't get you there. On food packaging, "natural" simply means the meat product contains no artificial ingredients, and that it was minimally processed. In other words, the steak wasn't pumped up with a sodium solution to make it more tender.

"Naturally raised," on the other hand, indicates a set of practices ranchers and beef companies have followed with their beef cattle. But exactly what it means depends on the brand.

"Right now the majority of claims on naturally raised animal products are defined by the individual company," says Billy Cox, spokesman for the USDA's agricultural marketing service. "It depends on the company what their definition of 'natural' is. That's confused a lot of people in the marketplace."

Under most brands, it means no hormones given to animals, no antibiotics and an all-vegetarian diet. Ranchers supply documentation and sign affidavits to become part of such groups as Country Natural Beef or Niman Ranch, and USDA has the authority to audit the paperwork.

A nationwide standard is on the way: USDA just wrote rules, though they're not yet in effect, outlining requirements for using the term "naturally raised." To use the marketing claim, producers must raise animals without added hormones and most antibiotics, and feed 100 percent vegetarian rations (no animal proteins).

One thing that lots of "green" beef eaters don't know is that most "naturally raised" animals spend three to six months in feedlots, which are thought by many to be a source of environmental, worker-safety and animal welfare problems. But again, the picture is nuanced.

Oregon's midsize operations have more space per cow and better living conditions for animals than the industry norm. Betty Fussell, author of the new book "Raising Steaks" (see accompanying story), spent time at dozens of feedlots around the nation, including Beef Northwest Feeders in Boardman, and concludes that those "in the right location and on the right scale can be run humanely and soundly. If they are not an ideal way to fatten cows, neither are they in themselves the devil's work. The details matter."

LESSON NO. 4

There are no, or few, guarantees.

Proponents of organic food scored a huge victory when USDA's national organic program passed, with uniform standards for producers and certifying agents verifying producers' claims.

But guess what? Most "naturally raised" beef -- the lion's share of the green market -- isn't certified by an outside party. Despite the pending USDA regulation governing the term "naturally raised," producers only need submit adequate paperwork to make the claim -- there's no requirement for third-party verification.

Beef producers can pay for certification with inspections by independent groups, such as the Portland-based Food Alliance, or Humane Farm Animal Care, but many opt not to because of the cost.

That doesn't mean ranchers are trying to break the rules; in fact, it's in their best interest to pursue practices that keep animals and the land healthy.

"There are all these people who are trying to scratch out a living in central and eastern Oregon," says Brett Meisner, sales consultant with SP Provisions, which sells Cascade Natural Beef, a brand that

works with about 10 Oregon and Washington ranches. "They're doing great stuff, and they don't get credit for it."

If you're skeptical, do some homework. Go to a farmers market and talk to a rancher. Check out the Web sites. Call and ask questions.

LESSON NO. 5

Beef is like wine.

Finally, let's not make assumptions about taste. Beef is much more complex than marbling, natural or organic.

"It's a heckuva lot more like wine," says Oliver, who hosts blind tastings of artisan beef for groups around the country. "There are other things that influence taste besides marbling."

Breed, diet, stress on animals, regional differences and aging have much to do with taste, which can be all over the spectrum, and all still good.

One common misconception is that grass-finished beef is too lean to taste good. "If it's been well-raised and aged well, you can have absolutely delicious, full-flavored meat," Oliver says. "And I think that surprises people."

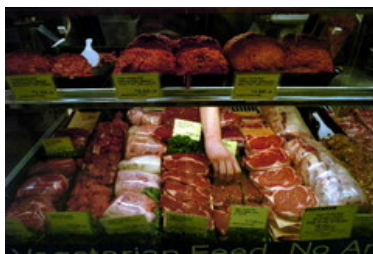
Oliver suggests looking past vagaries on the label, doing your homework and finding producers you can trust.

In the conventional cattle system, it's all about marbling (USDA grade) and yield. Now that we have more beef options, we should explore them, even if it means doing a little more work to find what you want.

"The truth is, there's a lot of natural variety," Oliver says. "If we can find a way to celebrate that, we'll be better off."

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What's in a name?



Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian

More producers of artisan beef are joining the herd as consumer demand for healthier practices grows. Some stores, such as New Seasons, even offer their own house brand of beef.

Here's what Oregon's best-known naturally raised beef producers have to say:

Country Natural Beef (formerly Oregon Country Beef): Pasture-raised, grain-finished for 90 days, USDA grade high Select/low Choice. Cooperative with around 100 members, started in 1986 with 14 ranches in Oregon. Only animals born and raised on members' ranches are part of program. No animal products in feed, no antibiotics or hormones given to animals. Certified by Food Alliance, independent third party that has standards for animal welfare, sustainable farming and fair labor practices.

Painted Hills Natural Beef: Pasture-raised, grain-finished (corn, alfalfa, barley for 4 to 5 months before processing), USDA Choice beef. Owners of seven Wheeler County ranches manage program, which markets cattle from about 70 Oregon and Washington and Idaho ranches. No animal products in feed, no antibiotics or hormones given to animals. Angus or Angus-cross animals; ownership maintained through processing.

Cascade Natural Beef: Pasture-raised, grain-finished. Private label started by Portland meat distributor SP Provisions about five years ago. Works with 10 Northwest ranches, who sign affidavits to participate in program. Angus or Angus-cross cattle, wet aged at least 21 days. Small size of program allows for greater quality control, sales associate Brett Meisner says.

Strawberry Mountain Natural Beef: Founded in 2005 by John Day rancher Darrel Holliday. Beef comes from more than 20 ranches, pasture-raised, grain-finished for 90-120 days. Angus or Angus-cross, USDA Choice grade. Among the few programs that dry ages its beef, aged 14 to 21 days. Ground meat products get more e-coli testing at plant than what USDA specifies.

-- *Leslie Cole*

What do the labels mean?

Here are commonly accepted definitions of terms found on meat labels.

To learn more about what's behind specific brands or certification programs, check Consumer Reports' eco-labels center: www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels

Grass-fed: Though all cows eat grass for a portion of their lives, true grass-fed beef eats only grass or hay for the duration of its life. For ranchers who rear cattle on grass, it's not just about food, it's a philosophy, encompassing range management and holistic raising of animals. Asking for "grass-finished" or "all grass fed" is the best way to find this type of beef.

Grass-fed, grain-finished: Common practice for "naturally raised" beef, where cattle spend up to a year on pasture before going to a feed yard to eat corn or another vegetarian ration for fattening and extra marbling.

Naturally raised: Implies no hormones added to feed, no antibiotics administered and 100 percent vegetarian feed, and that cattle had access to pasture for a bigger portion of its life than commercial beef.

Organic beef: Beef that grazes on pasture that's certified organic and eats only certified organic grains. You won't find much Certified Organic beef at the meat counter, partly because of the shortage and expense of organic grain and the cost of certification, which some producers don't want to shoulder or pass on to customers.

Free-range: A term usually applied to poultry. The corollary for cattle is "pasture-raised," meaning livestock spends many months on pasture, as opposed to conventional beef that spends much of its life in confined feeding operations.

Vegetarian diet: Feeding rations did not contain ground-up animal parts.

No antibiotics, no added hormones: Antibiotics and growth hormones are feed additives in conventional beef operations. If this is your issue, ask producers if theirs is a "never, never" program, meaning the animal hasn't been given growth enhancers or antibiotics at any point in its life. Some programs interpret "none" as nothing given 120 days before slaughter.

USDA Prime, Choice, Select: A measure of intramuscular fat or marbling, with Prime having the most, Select the least.

Dry aged: The traditional process of placing a whole carcass in a refrigerated room and allowing enzymes to break down muscle fibers and develop flavor. Done by only a handful of producers and butchers.

Wet aged: Beef vacuum-packed in heavy plastic held at 34 to 38 degrees for seven to 28 days. Meat becomes more tender, but flavor isn't as concentrated as with dry aging.

-- *Leslie Cole*

Author sees some 'good guys' in cattle industry

Food writer Betty Fussell knows beef and all its contradictions. The woman who describes herself as a "mad carnivore" spent months visiting stock shows and rodeos, talking with meat scientists and cattlemen (including Oregon's own Doc and Connie Hatfield, founders of Country Natural Beef), and getting to know environmentalists and feedlot operators.

The result is "Raising Steaks: The Life and Times of American Beef" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$26, 416 pages), an engaging read in which Fussell takes on the history, science and politics of beef.

We recently spoke with Fussell by phone about the growth of the green movement in beef, and the enduring confusion about brands, labels and claims.

Now that "natural" beef is more widely available, you see lots of labels with different claims, from grass-fed to vegetarian-fed to sustainably raised. How to choose?

The problem is there are so many elements involved: Niman Ranch was never grass-finished; Country Natural was never grass-finished. (Instead), they were concentrating on humane practices, small ranches, small feedlots. They were the opposite of the great big four (U.S. meat processors/packers).

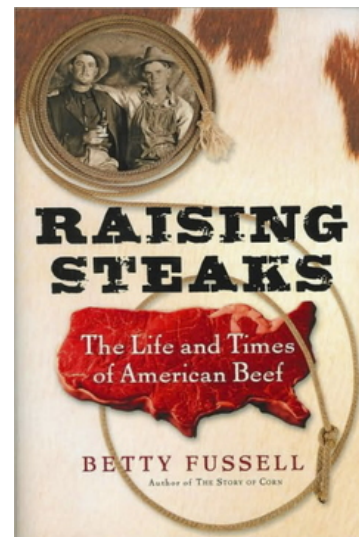
I think they're all good guys, because they're very responsible toward their animals and what they're doing.

What happens when "natural" beef marketing cooperatives, such as Niman Ranch or Country Natural Beef, grow? Can they become too large to be accountable for their practices and cattle?

How to square the business model for growth with small and local and regional? That's a problem.

More ranchers want to come in (under a "natural beef" label) because it's a good thing (for profits). Then you have to supply your suppliers. Then someone like Whole Foods gets interested. Then they really have to keep expanding. So where's the control? It's hard to maintain.

Talk to me about feedlots or feed yards, where cattle go to be fattened up before slaughter. Is there such a thing as a "good" feedlot?



There is to me. There isn't to Michael Pollan (author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma") or Eric Schlosser (author of "Fast Food Nation"). I'm not a purist on this. I've seen some small-scale feedlots where things are being done well. It is the enormously big feedlots where you have 100,000 or 200,000 head ... that's not good for anyone.

There are a whole lot of (beef producers) that grew up kind of naturally, like Harris Ranch, the family-owned companies where everything is local, well-managed, family-owned. I hate the big generalizations.

What's the greenest beef of all?

The green-minded shopper should look for beef that's grass-finished and humanely cared for. It's the whole package.

When a meat package says things like "no antibiotics, no hormones," or "pasture raised," can I assume it to be true?

You can't just trust the name. The name is the brand. You have to know more than that. Bill Niman (founder of Niman Ranch) sold the brand last fall. He's out of it. This is not unusual. This is the way our publicity machinery has worked for a century, so why should we trust brands?

The buyer needs to investigate. Spend time looking around. Be skeptical. Go to your local farmers market. Talk to ranchers, talk to growers. See who you like. Look at the Internet. Try to find out for yourself.

-- *Leslie Cole*