

Beef Choices

Cattle farmers and ranchers use resources available in their area to raise cattle in a variety of ways to provide beef choices consumers see in grocery stores and at restaurants. There are more than 1 million beef farmers and ranchers throughout the United States who offer a variety of beef choices to meet the changing lifestyles of consumers, including grain-fed, grass-finished, certified organic and natural beef.

While each kind of beef offers specific value to consumers, all beef is safe and nutritious. Beef goes through a rigorous inspection process and is subject to strict government guidelines to ensure the highest levels of safety. Today's lean beef is one of the most flavorful and efficient ways to meet the daily value for 10 essential nutrients like iron, zinc and B vitamins. There are 29 different steak, roast and ground beef choices that meet U.S. government guidelines for lean.

Grain-Fed Beef

Grain-fed beef is the most widely produced beef in the United States. Grain-fed cattle spend most of their lives grazing pasture before moving to a feedlot for approximately four to six months where they are fed a carefully balanced diet that usually includes grain. Feeding cattle a grain-based ration for a small period of time helps improve meat quality and provide a more tender and juicy product for consumers.

While cattle are in feedlots, owners and managers ensure they have a balanced diet; access to clean water; room to grow and roam; and overall, humane treatment. To help improve their productivity, grain-fed cattle may receive growth promotants that have been rigorously tested and proven safe.

Natural Beef and Naturally Raised

By government definition, most beef is natural. According to USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), "natural" may be used on a label for meat if it does not contain any artificial flavor or flavoring, coloring ingredient, chemical preservative or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient, and the product and its ingredients are not more than minimally processed. This definition only applies to how the meat was processed after the cattle were harvested and does not apply to how the animals were raised.*

Marketers also have been applying the term "natural" to beef labels based on how the animals were raised. In January 2009, USDA published a voluntary standard for "naturally raised" livestock that allows for third-party verification of these claims (Federal Register: Vol. 74, Num. 12).

- Beef with a USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)-certified "naturally raised" claim comes from cattle that have never received growth promotants or supplemental hormones, have never been administered antibiotics and were not fed animal by-products.

* In September 2009 USDA/FSIS published an Advance Notice of Public Rulemaking to solicit further public comment to define the conditions under which it would permit the voluntary claim "natural" to be used in the labeling of meat and poultry products. The objective is to coordinate FSIS' regulation of natural claims with the AMS voluntary "naturally raised" marketing claim standard. More information is at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Frame/FrameRedirect.asp?main=http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OPPDE/rdad/FRPubs/2006-0040A.htm>

Grass (Forage) Fed or Grass-Finished Beef

Similar to “naturally raised” beef, grass-finished beef refers to how the cattle were managed prior to harvest and specifically, to the type of diet the cattle consumed. While most cattle spend the majority of their lives in pastures eating grass before moving to a feedlot for grain-finishing, grass-finished beef cattle remain on a pasture and forage diet their entire lives.

In October 2007, USDA published standards that give beef farmers and ranchers specific guidelines about the type of diet acceptable for cattle qualifying for the “grass (forage) fed” marketing claim.

- Grass and forage should make up the animal’s diet for its entire lifetime, with the exception of milk consumed prior to weaning.
- It is difficult to produce large quantities of grass-finished beef on a year-round basis due to seasonality. For this reason, grass-finished beef can be more expensive, and some grass-finished beef sold in the United States may be imported from countries with more temperate climates.

Grass-finished beef may have a slightly different fatty acid profile than grain-fed beef; however, the difference is not significant. Grass-finished beef can contain more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) than other kinds of beef, but research has not determined whether this results in a significant health benefit. Research also has shown that a 3.5-ounce serving of grass-finished beef offers 15 milligrams more omega-3 than other kinds of beef; however, beef is not a primary source of omega-3 fatty acids.

Certified Organic Beef

Beef labeled as “certified organic” must be from cattle that meet USDA National Organic Program (NOP) livestock production requirements. Grain-fed beef, naturally raised or grass-finished beef may be eligible for USDA’s NOP certification if the additional requirements are met.

The Organic Foods Production Act, effective October 2002, sets the standards for all food labeled organic (<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/FactSheets/ProdHandE.html>). For beef, this means:

- Cattle must be fed certified organic feed but may be given certain vitamin and minerals.
- Organically raised cattle may not be given growth promotants or receive antibiotics. Any animal that is treated with antibiotics to ensure its health must be removed from the NOP.
- Organically raised cattle must have access to pasture—they may be temporarily confined for specific reasons. However, most cattle in the United States, regardless of how they are raised, meet this criterion.