



## Beyond Organic

By Jo Robinson

Organically certified meat, poultry, and dairy products are now available at your local supermarket. When you see the green USDA organic label, you know the food is going to be free of pesticide residues, synthetic hormones, antibiotics, and genetically-modified grain. Compared with ordinary meat, this is a step in the right direction.

But the USDA organic beef regulations fall short of many people's expectations—especially when it comes to cattle. Specifically, the USDA rules allow cattle to be fed a high-grain diet—not their native diet of grass—and permit cattle to be confined much of the time. That expensive, USDA-certified organic steak at your grocery store is likely to come from a cow that spent most of its time in a feedlot eating far too much grain.

These shortcomings matter a great deal, not just to animal and nature lovers, but to all consumers concerned about basic human nutrition and food safety. The problems begin with the grain. When calves are taken off pasture and shipped to a feedlot to be fattened for market, they are switched from grass to a high-energy grain diet to speed their growth and marble their flesh. But grain does not agree with cattle and other ruminants such as bison and sheep. Ruminants are highly specialized animals with multi-compartmented stomachs that allow them to thrive on a diet of high-fiber, bulky grasses—food that we humans cannot digest. Feeding grain to these grass guzzlers is like running a Prius on furnace oil; it fouls up the works. The “fuel” problem for cattle is that grain makes their digestive tract more acid, giving the animals chronic belly aches. Feedlot calves respond to this acid indigestion by pawing at their bellies, hanging their heads, drooling, or eating dirt. Untreated, the calves can develop a more serious condition called “acidosis.” If acidosis goes unchecked, lesions that can be fatal will form in the animals' livers. Corn-fed beef comes with a cost.

By contrast, when cattle are raised from birth to market on grass, they remain in excellent health. Routine vaccination is the only medication they require. A vet told me that the only time he goes to grass-based ranches is to do pregnancy tests. The rest of his time is spent helping feedlot managers control the many diseases caused by excessive grain-feeding and the stress of shipping and confinement.

What is good for the cattle turns out to be good for our health as well. Dozens of studies now show that meat and dairy products from grass-fed animals have a bounty of added nutrients. Compared with grain-fed cattle—organic or otherwise—the meat and milk of grass-fed cattle have more antioxidants, including vitamin E, beta-carotene, and vitamin C. The meat is also lower in overall fat and higher in healthy omega-3s and another healthy fat called “conjugated linoleic acid” or [CLA](http://www.eatwild.com/cla.html) (<http://www.eatwild.com/cla.html>).

Eating products from grass-fed animals also gives you an added measure of food safety. Since the 1990s, we've gotten used to meat being recalled for possible E. coli contamination. In 2008, one such recall involved a staggering 135 million pounds of beef. Eating grass-fed meat may reduce your risk of being sickened by these potentially lethal bacteria. The main reason is that grass-fed cattle and other ruminants that live outdoors on pasture arrive at the slaughterhouse with relatively clean hides. Cattle that live in the mud and manure of feedlots tend to arrive coated with feces that may harbor E. coli bacteria. The USDA has determined that the cleaner the hides, the lower the risk that the bacteria will find its way into the meat supply.

Although organic grain-fed meat has advantages over conventional grain-fed meat, it does not measure up to the benefits that come from eating 100-percent grass-fed meat. Raising ruminants on grass is better for animals and consumers. Go grass!

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