



You Are What You Eat

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Published on 9/10/2004

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Mystic -

"The public does not understand what they're putting in their mouths," said Craig Floyd of Old Mystic.

He was referring to what goes on at commercial feedlots, which are the last stop before the slaughterhouse for much of the meat sold in this country. Feeders sometimes focus their actions on weight gain and cost efficiency, and not the health of the consumer. Therefore, some feedlots have served up feeds made from animal parts and fillers.

To help cows gain weight faster, antibiotics, steroids and hormones are sometimes mixed in with the feed. The corn and soybeans that they eat may have been grown with pesticides, herbicides and commercial fertilizers.

"They're doing that because they want to make them bigger," he said.

Floyd, a big believer in "you are what you eat," didn't like eating cows that are fed things he wouldn't eat. So when he decided to start raising animals on his ancestral Old Mystic farm, he chose a grass-based feeding system. His cows -- along with his sheep, pigs, turkeys and chickens -- are raised on pasture and eat primarily grass.

"I don't believe it's harmful for them to eat grain," he said, but "ruminants were not designed to eat grain."

"By strictly eating grass, the animal is more healthy, and since you are what you eat, you are more healthy," he added.

A health concern that has made headlines lately is mad cow disease, which can cause Creutzfeldt–Jacob disease, a rare neurological disorder, in humans who eat infected beef. Cattle can contract mad cow when they eat processed feed made from animal parts.

On a grass–only diet, "It's impossible for them to get mad cow disease," Floyd noted.

Carrie Balkcom, executive director of the American Grassfed Association in Colorado, echoed Floyd's thoughts.

"(Grass–fed beef) has lower saturated fat," she said, and it's "higher in omega–3 fatty acids," which research suggests may protect against heart disease.

A pasture system is better for the cows, she said, because they spend their entire lives on pasture and are never confined to a feedlot.

"They're eating what nature intended them to eat," she said. There is also subjective evidence that grass–fed meat tastes better. Balkcom, who said she was raised on a ranch and grew up eating home–raised beef, said grass–fed beef "tastes the way beef should taste."

Floyd agreed, saying that grass–fed meat is sweeter than grain–fed. "It really makes a difference what they eat," he said.

In the case of Floyd's cattle, what they eat is a pasture of mostly perennial rye, but also clover, alfalfa and timothy. In the wintertime, when the grass is dormant, he buys hay for the animals to eat.

One disadvantage to grass–based management systems -- and this is a disadvantage only for the farmer -- is that cattle bound for market typically don't gain weight as fast on pasture as they do in a feedlot.

"It's a slower growth," Balkcom said. "They're not being pumped a bunch of stuff."

But it's important to note that raising grass-fed cattle can still be a profitable enterprise. It is not yet profitable to Floyd, because of his newness to this venture.

"It's gonna take me five years to get my pastures in shape," he said of his property, which was farmed from 1712 to the 1960s, and has been fallow for about 40 years.

Tom Lasater of Lasater Ranch in Colorado has a little more experience in this trade. "We've been in the cattle business for over 100 years," he said, and the cattle have always been raised strictly on pasture. Lasater Ranch was initially a purebred cattle operation only, but seven years ago Lasater started Lasater Grasslands Beef, a direct-to-consumer enterprise that sells grass-fed beef through his Web site, www.lgbeef.com.

"Our cattle spend their entire lives outside," Lasater said. Like Floyd, Lasater feeds only pasture most of the year, and alfalfa hay when that's not possible. His cattle are not fed antibiotics, hormones or pesticides.

"One more advantage is that the meat (of grass-fed cattle) is much more lean," Lasater said. "It's healthier from the point of view that it has less fat."

In addition, he said, "Our meat is usually much more red than feedlot beef."

He concurred with Floyd and Balkcom about the improved taste of grass-fed beef. "It tastes completely different," he said, comparing the difference between the taste of grass-fed and feedlot beef to the difference in taste between garden-fresh and supermarket tomatoes.

Lasater raises Beefmaster cattle, a breed developed by his grandfather in the 1930s. He insisted, however, that the choice of breed is irrelevant.

"Any breed of cattle would be just fine for grass-fed beef," he said. Balkcom agreed in part, saying that different breeds are best suited for different geographical areas. In particular, "the heritage breeds do really well," she said, referring to the older breeds of cattle that

were popular prior to modern crossbreeding and selective breeding techniques.

Floyd's cattle, which are of the Scottish highland breed, are considered heritage cattle.

"I wanted to do things an old-fashioned way," he said of his choice of cattle and feed. "Most of the time, the old-fashioned way of doing things is the best way."

He may really be on to something. "Grass-fed production is up, and consumers are asking for it," Balkcom said.