GRASS-FED VS GRAIN-FED BEEF

As consumer demand for wholesome, “clean” ingredients and foods are on the rise, any health-conscious coed with internet access will undoubtedly come across guidance about what meat to choose. Fitness and health blogs abound with advice towards “grass-fed” beef. But what does “grass-fed” beef really mean? And is it really a better choice? If you’re a penny-pinching college student, is the extra-cost of grass-fed worth it?

First, it’s important to understand that ALL BEEF is grass-fed. All cattle spend the majority of their lives eating grass in pastures. The difference lies in where the cattle spend the last 4-6 months of their lives.

GRASS-FED: Since all cattle eat grass, “grass-finished” is a more accurate term for what most people call “grass-fed”. The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) of the USDA had set the standard for the marketing claim “grass-fed” to mean meat that comes from animals that spend their entire lives grazing in pastures. These animals need to have continuous access to pasture for their entire growth period. While their primary nutritional intake is grass, other forages (like hay) is acceptable, as are vaccinations, vitamin/mineral supplements, FDA-approved antibiotics, and growth promotants. As of January 2016, the AMS withdrew the “grass-fed” marketing claim and its standards from its certification processes and no longer provides certification/verification that beef producers are adhering to the previously set standards for “grass fed”. There are however, other third party organizations that provide regulation and verification of grass-fed (and other) claims, but the standards vary from organization to organization.

CONVENTIONALLY-RAISED/GRAIN-FINISHED: Most beef in the U.S. comes from cattle that are raised on grass for most of their lives and then spend the last 4-6 months of their life in a feed yard, where they free to eat an optimal, balanced diet of grasses, grains and other forages (including ingredients like corn, soybean meal, oats, and barley blends). While in the feed yard, the cattle receive individual attention, access to clean water, room to roam, and like grass-fed beef, can receive vaccinations, vitamin/mineral supplements, FDA-approved antibiotics and growth promotants.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

- NUTRITION: What an animal eats can affect the nutrition content of its meat. Proponents of grass-finished beef point out that it can contain double the amount of heart/brain-healthy, anti-inflammatory omega-three fatty acids when compared to its counterpart; however, the overall omega-three content of all types of beef is relatively low, especially compared with preferred sources of omega-threes, like salmon (3.5 oz of grass-finished beef: 80 mg omega-threes; 3.5 oz salmon: 1000-2000 mg omega threes. Also interesting to note is that extended grain feeding can increase the amount of heart-healthy, cholesterol-lowering monounsaturated fat in beef (grain-finished beef: 45% of fat is the monounsaturated type; grass-finished beef: 41% of fat is the monounsaturated type;
Some antioxidants and other nutrients are sometimes higher in grass-finished beef, but these differences are not always significant and are variable, depending on the location/type of forage/grass the cattle are eating; feed yard rations are generally more standardized.

- COST: Grass-finished beef is more expensive. A quick price check at HEB reveals grass-fed rib-eye steaks at $15.97/pound, compared to conventionally-raised (grain-finished) ribeye steaks for $8.47/pound in May 2017. Grass-finished cattle can take a year longer than conventionally-raised cattle to reach the weight they need to attain to be sold for meat; consider the price of the labor, care, and pasture management for an extra year per head. And ultimately, grass-finished cattle are often smaller overall, resulting in less meat to sell per animal. To maintain a decent profit-margin, ranchers pass on the extra expense to the consumer.

- ENVIRONMENT: Proponents of grass-fed beef contend that it is better for the environment, but this is a point of controversy. From a resource standpoint, grain-finished beef appears to be a winner for the environment; these conventionally-raised cattle use significantly less land and less water. In addition, due to their shorter lifespans, conventionally-raised (grain-finished) cattle emit less greenhouses gasses and methane than their grass-fed counterparts. Conceivable environmental benefits to grass-fed beef production includes more evenly distributed manure, potentially resulting in the improvement in the quality and quantity of forage growth.

- TASTE: Grass-finished beef is typically leaner than grain-finished resulting in a final product that is chewier/tougher and sometimes more dry than grain-finished meat. But the cut of meat and preparation techniques can vary greatly. While some describe the taste of grass-fed beef as more “gamey” than grain-fed; others prefer the taste of grass-fed beef and describe it as “nuttier” and “more robust” than grain-fed. Others can’t tell the difference between the two.

BOTTOM LINE: Beef from cattle raised in the U.S. is safe to eat, very nutritious (providing a great source of protein and 10 other essential nutrients) and delicious, regardless of the animal’s diet in the last 4-6 months of its life. While there are potential nutritional benefits to grass-fed beef, when you consider these minor differences in the context of a person’s overall diet/nutrition intake, there’s no clear, obvious, significant benefit to one’s health. Frugal college students can feel confident in the nutrition and safety of conventionally/grain-fed beef and can consider spending that extra money on more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low fat dairy to round out their nutritional intake. For more information about healthy meat choices or any other nutrition-related matter, be sure to set up a nutrition assessment with Campus Recreation’s registered dietitian nutritionist, Annie Bell. Appointments are individualized to address your needs, questions, and concerns and last about an hour – oh, and they’re free! Full instructions on how to register for your appointment are here: https://campusrec.utsa.edu/nutritionregistration

SOURCES: