

Grain wave

The Age "Epicure" by Richard Cornish September 2, 2008

**Did your beef graze on grass or dine in an industrial feedlot?
Richard Cornish investigates the taste difference.**



Sue Jenkins and David Visser of Maerdy Farm.

Photo: *Supplied*

"Good grass-fed beef is brilliant. It's the reason why we eat meat. It has that classic beefy flavour, but it can only handle being cooked to medium and no more," he says.

"The highlight for grain-fed beef is its consistency. The public prefers tenderness over taste - and that's grain-fed beef."

To test Curley's theory, *Epicure* gathered eight impartial meat eaters to the Siglo Bar above the European for a blind taste test. They were only told they were there to taste beef. Curley cooked nine porterhouse steaks, four grass-fed, five grain-fed, ranging from supermarket bargains to top-end restaurant product. He cooked each one to medium-rare and was allowed to only use a touch of salt.

THE battle for the Australian beef eater's tastebuds has been raging for decades. In one corner are the traditionalists, who savour grass-fed beef's deep mineral flavours and toothsome texture. In the other corner is the beef industry, pushing grain-fed beef with its emphasis on tenderness, rich mouthfeel and dependable consistency. Quite literally, these two beef products come from different sides of the fence.

The grass-fed steer will have spent its days in the open, grazing on a mix of grasses. The grain-fed animal may have been raised in the paddock next to its grass-fed cousin, but will have spent its last months in a feedlot, fed on a rich mix of grains, supplements and, most likely, be injected with growth hormones.

To help clear the air over which type of beef Australians prefer, *Epicure* approached the European and City Wine Shop executive chef Ian Curley. He comes from a family of butchers, is passionate about meat and during his 20-year career has cooked more than 120,000 steaks.

The tasters had no information about the steaks and were asked to make tasting notes on each and to pick their first, second and third favourite. The result was an unequivocal win for the grain, with all tasters commenting on the tenderness of the grain-fed beef and half of the first-place votes going to a dry-aged Hopkins River 120-day grain-fed steak.

Although Australians love grain-fed beef's tenderness, there are a few dark clouds looming on the industry horizons. Riding on the back of the popularity of grain-fed beef are the grain-fed fakes. Gina Lincoln, general manager of the ICM Peechelba Feedlot near Wangaratta, points her finger at unaccredited "opportunity feedlots" where cattle, she says, "may get, perhaps three or four handfuls of grain and then get sold in small butchers' shops where the butcher could plonk a 'grain-fed' sign into the steak and it would eat like shoe leather. That's not good for the industry." She blames the lack of laws and regulations that cover the meat industry and terms such as "grain-fed".

To avoid grain-fed fakes, consumers should look for a grain-fed label from Aus Meat, the industry-appointed and government-recognised company that certifies cattle in the self-regulated grain-fed industry. To be officially grain-fed, cattle must be fed a high-calorie diet of grain for a minimum of 70 days before slaughter. At 70 days there is a slight, but noticeable, change in the taste and texture of the beef.

"But the real change in flavour and marbling happens at the 100-150 day mark," Lincoln says, explaining that marbling describes the fine layers of fat interlacing the muscles. These release fat into the mouth during chewing, giving a pleasing, moist sensation.

The labelling problems in the meat industry extend beyond grain-fed fakes. Some beef producers are frustrated by the deliberate mislabelling of breeds.

"There is a lot of product that is sold as Angus that is not Angus," says Phil Morley, Sydney-based chief executive of Certified Australian Angus Beef (CAAB). His company has spent years and invested much in establishing paddock-to-plate traceability of its premium grain-fed beef brand. His company's beef is sold in Safeway and butchers and always has a distinctive label or sticker. This ensures the beef comes from an Angus animal and is fed on grain for a minimum of 100 days, although most animals will have been fed grain for 120-150 days.

"There's beef in butcher's shops with labels that read Certified Angus that is not certified and you can't eat the bloody stuff. Our labelling laws are a disgrace."

Concerns about lax meat-labelling regulations led Senator Bill Heffernan, a lamb producer, to set up an inquiry into the meat industry, which will deliver its findings.

Substitution aside, research funded by the US grass-fed beef industry could prompt a new health scare here. Studies by the College of Agriculture at California State University state the health benefits of grass-fed meat but raise concerns about grain-fed beef. One Australian hospital, Brisbane's Wesley Hospital, is already warning its heart patients off grain-fed beef, saying it is high in saturated fat.

Depending on the time of the year, 80-100% of supermarket beef comes from a feedlot. It is common practice during the time at the feedlot for the cattle to have hormone growth promotant (HGP) pellets inserted under the skin of the ear.

This is a steroid that helps the cattle grow more muscle. Although no residue of the hormone is left in the beef when it is slaughtered, the idea of hormones in meat is undesirable to many.

A representative from Coles says that "Coles purchases both feedlot and grass-fed beef, and some of this beef would have been treated with a HGP". He adds: "We are exploring how we can phase out the use of HGPs on cattle destined for our stores."

A spokesman for Woolworths says: "Beef sold in Australia in butcher's shops, supermarkets and food service may contain some form of HGPs. This has been common industry practice for some time."

Another concern is the feed itself. Grain-fed cattle eat mainly barley, with some hay, canola meal, GM white cotton seed and fermented corn byproduct that gives the feed a sweet, bourbon-like aroma. It is the inclusion of the cotton seed that will concern consumers. Under Australia's food-labelling laws, the meat from an animal fed genetically modified food doesn't have to be labelled as such.

Grain-fed beef producers, however, say their product is superior to the quality of grass-fed beef that we were eating 20 years ago. Back then, many of our beef cattle destined for the mass market were poorly bred, may have grazed on less than prime pastures and may have been badly handled on the way to the abattoir, leading to tough, dark meat.

Gina Lincoln and other meat industry experts say the local beef industry followed the American path to industrialised feedlot farming that could produce consistently tender beef.

Since then, the grass-fed beef industry had to address its diminishing slice of the meat pie. A Queensland company is trying to create a third-party-accredited grass-fed label that would guarantee beef that comes from animals fed on grass and raised without GM feeds, hormones or antibiotics.

Leading the way locally with grass-fed branding is a consortium of Gippsland farmers. Enviromeat, founded in 2002, not only promises that its cattle are 100% grass fed, but also requires its 40 or so graziers to farm sustainably. The group produces just 700 carcasses a year to a handful of small butchers. The farmers must fence off creeks, replant trees and manage their fertilisers. As a reward, they are paid 20% more for their meat.

Enviromeat business and environmental manager, Jenny O'Sullivan, says there are still inconsistencies with grass-fed beef. "There is variability from our beef due to the changes in nutrients over the seasons, but only the carcasses that grade according to MSA (Meat and Livestock Australia) requirements are sold under our label." Animals that are sick, stressed or badly handled won't pass the MSA grading scheme and therefore won't receive the Enviromeat label.

Maerdy Farm on French Island, 70 kilometres south-east of Melbourne, supplies to Enviromeat. Almost 25% of the farm has been fenced for regeneration, leaving only 30 hectares to produce just 18 cattle a year. Owners Sue Jenkins and David Visser see small operations such as theirs filling niche markets for "consumers who want clean, green, chemical-and-hormone-free beef".

Visser says the business is essentially a hobby farm, but argues: "Why would you want to take any farmland out of production when there is a global food crisis?"

Chef Ian Curley says, "Most of the public have the image of cattle eating grass. But that's no longer the case - most people buy beef from the supermarket and that's basically grain-fed beef.

"The meat industry has done a good job of taking the visceral nature of meat away from the public by packing it into little boxes, and in doing so, a lot of public understanding has been lost. Those important learning opportunities between grower and butcher, and butcher and customer, have been lost.

"But now people are waking up and wanting to know where their meat comes from."

Epicure beef tasting

Coles \$8.87/kg

You get what you pay for. Our tasters' comments included, "poor texture and unpleasant taste", "not juicy, not good" and "unpleasant and stringy".

Safeway \$16.87/kg

We were told this was from a British breed finished on grain. The steaks again were poorly butchered but were easy to cut, smelt "clean" and tasted "inoffensive"; described as "sweet".

Enviromeat \$29.95-\$39.95/kg

The steaks were "good looking and easy to cut", "juicy and fresh smelling" with "plump but lean-tasting meat with an enjoyable flavour and mouthfeel".

www.enviromeat.com.au

Gippsland Natural \$28.99/kg

Another grass-fed beef brand out of Gippsland producing some steaks that were easy to cut but a little more toothsome with a lasting juiciness. Almost every taster commented on the pronounced flavour of these steaks. www.gippslandnatural.com.au

Greenham's \$26/kg

From north-west Tasmania came these grass-fed steaks that were a "touch stringy". They did cut well, had an enticing aroma and "strong taste and good marbling" in the rare centre of the steak. Overall, well received.

www.greenham.com.au

Cape Grim Tasmanian Natural Beef \$36/kg

These dry-aged steaks were voted the top of the grass-fed meats with a great

appearance, ruby interior, firm flesh and a distinct malty flavour and smell. Several tasters commented on the sweet fat "that tastes like honey and flesh that tastes like popcorn". On the menu at Rockpool Bar & Grill.

www.capegrimbeef.com.au

Coorong Angus Beef Dry Aged \$35/kg

THIRD PLACE

The first of the grain-fed steaks came from this niche South Australian producer. Angus cattle were grain-fed for 120 days then dry-aged for 28 days. They were described as being "substantial, satisfying with good molar resistance" and fine flavour and length.

www.feastfinefoods.com.au

Certified Australian Angus Beef \$24.95/kg

SECOND PLACE

With 100 days minimum on grain this is the grain-fed beef sold in Safeway. What it lacked in flavour it made up for in tenderness. Our steak was "super succulent" and "super soft, not a strong taste and easy to chew".

www.caab.com.au

Hopkins River Beef/\$25/kg

FIRST PLACE

From western Victoria, these steaks, from hormone-free Angus cattle grain-fed for 120 days, impressed a lot of the tasters. They were juicy and easy to chew with a very delicate texture. One taster commented on the pleasant fat asking, "Is this Wagyu?" Another described it as "toffee-like", while another wrote "Fantastic, no comparison".

www.hopkinsriverbeef.com or buy from www.wangaragame.com.au

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