

Organic Beef; Is it Worth the Extra Costs?

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While organically produced foods comprise a very small proportion of the food basket, next to ethanol production, organic product development is about the fastest growing segment of the agriculture industry. There appears to be widening consumer demand for such products. But, are organically produced commodities safer, healthier and worth the extra cost? The answer to this perplexing question is difficult to address, because it depends on who you are and your perspective. If you are an economist or a scientist, the answer is probably no. If you produce organic food products or are an advocate of “health” or “organic” food, then the answer is probably yes.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture states on its website: “USDA makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food. Organic food differs from conventionally produced food in the way it is grown, handled, and processed.”

There are essentially five types of beef, identified by marketing distinctions, not by nutritional or safety differences: conventional, natural, branded, certified organic and grass-finished. A “grass-finished” label is in the review process but has not been approved. Keep in mind that, by diversifying their product, beef producers are providing consumers a variety of quality beef products to choose from. By providing a relatively large number of alternatives, it appears that the U.S. beef industry is consumer-focused and market-driven. Providing alternative consumer choices may even mean that specialty market segments, who might otherwise be lost, are being served.

Conventional beef comes from cattle that are raised in pastures for the majority of their

lives, typically 12 to 18 months, and then are fed a grain-based diet designed to meet their nutritional needs for 120 to 200 days.

Natural beef refers to beef that has been minimally processed and contains no additives, which means no artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. According to the USDA, any meat can be labeled "natural" as long as it meets the following guidelines: "During processing, nothing synthetic is ever added to the meat, including preservatives, and the product is only minimally processed." This definition has no bearing on how the cattle are raised or what they are fed. This appears to mean that livestock grown under conventional systems would qualify as natural as long as the meat meets the processing requirements.

USDA recognizes the growing disparity among program guidelines and recently held several listening sessions to establish "proposed standards as related to livestock production natural claims..."

Branded beef products are marketed by a company based on the product specifications or production standards required for their brand. A brand could be based on the breed of cattle or a name given to a beef program that follows set specifications.

Certified organic beef must meet USDA National Organic Program standards. With the Organic Foods Production Act, effective October 2002, USDA standards were set for all food labeled organic. For beef, this means:

- Cattle must be fed 100 percent organic feed, but may be provided certain vitamin and mineral supplements.
- Organically raised cattle may not be given hormones to promote growth or antibiotics for any reason. However, if an animal is sick, the animal cannot be denied treatment to ensure its health; any animal that is treated with antibiotics is taken out of the National Organic Program.
- Organic beef must be certified through USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).

The proposed standard for **grass-finished beef** states that cattle shall have grazed in pastures their entire lives. While conventionally produced beef comes from cattle that spend most of their lives on pasture and are finished on a carefully balanced, grain-based diet, grass-finished cattle are raised entirely on grass. A grass-finished beef label is currently under review by USDA.

Safety and Health

In terms of food safety, are all types of beef inspected for safety? Yes, all beef processing, regardless of type, is subject to strict government oversight. U.S. procedures require that all cattle be inspected by a USDA inspector or veterinarian before going to slaughter.

In the final analysis, are natural, grass-fed and organic beef products healthier than conventional or branded beef? Science does not support these claims. To quote Dr. Gary C. Smith, Monfort Endowed Chair in Meat Science at Colorado State University and others “.To claim that conventional beef is inferior because it contains minute additional quantities of certain chemicals (e.g., hormones or pesticides), when it is not reasonably possible to eat enough beef of that kind to endanger personal health, is not appropriate. To say that grass-fed beef is superior because it contains minute additional quantities of certain chemicals (e.g., conjugated linoleic acid or vitamin E) when it is not reasonably possible to eat enough beef of that kind to improve personal health, is also not appropriate. Remember, conventional, natural, grass-fed and organic beef are defined by marketing distinctions, not by nutritional or safety differences (NCBA/CBB, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2005).”