

THE MEAT TO EAT

Sustainably raised meat is fantastic; it tastes great, it's produced without destroying the environment or threatening public health, and its sale supports responsible farmers who choose to use sound agricultural practices. Unfortunately, it's more expensive to raise animals sustainably than to mass-produce them on a factory farm (these industrial operations benefit from hefty government subsidies — and don't have to pay for the damage they cause). As a result, sustainably raised meat usually costs more than the cheap meat churned out by factory farms.

But don't be discouraged; you and your family can still enjoy sustainable meat — even if you're on a tight budget, by choosing quality over quantity. Why not experiment? One week, take the money you would have spent on meat, and use it to buy a smaller amount of sustainably raised meat at your local farmers' market, food coop or health food store. While you will eat less meat that week, you may find that you don't miss the factory farmed stuff one bit when you taste the delicious, sustainable alternative. And, with Americans, on average, eating twice as much meat as is recommended for a healthy diet, eating less meat of higher quality may be just what the doctor ordered.

A few benefits of sustainably raised meat:

SUPERIOR TASTE

Most people agree that sustainably raised foods simply taste better than anything produced by industrial agriculture. Ever compared a fresh tomato from a farmers' market to a tomato grown on a megafarm and shipped before it's even ripened? There's a dramatic difference. Likewise, you can expect sustainably raised meats to be much more flavorful than factory farmed varieties. It's no surprise that top restaurants and chefs choose to serve sustainable meat — it just tastes better!

HEALTH BENEFITS

Sustainably raised meats have a wide range of nutritional

benefits. Compared to factory farmed meat, sustainable meat from animals raised on pasture contains less fat, fewer calories, and higher levels of essential omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin E, beta carotene, and other important nutrients. As an added benefit, sustainably raised meat is produced without the use of growth hormones, nontherapeutic antibiotics, or unsavory feed additives that undermine public health. And of course, unlike factory farms, sustainable farms don't sicken workers and neighbors by spewing harmful pollutants into the environment.

FOOD SAFETY

Sustainably raised meats are typically processed either on the farm, or at small-scale facilities that cater to small-scale farmers and strive to maintain high standards of food safety. Factory farmed meat is chopped up at huge, industrial slaughterhouses where rapid production lines dramatically increase the risk of contamination by foodborne pathogens. As a result, these industrial processing facilities have been associated with major outbreaks of foodborne illness such as *E. coli* — and are periodically forced to conduct massive recalls of tainted meat in order to contain the damage done to the public. Although pathogens can contaminate any type of food, the abysmal safety record of factory farmed meat from mega-slaughterhouses leads many consumers to choose sustainably raised meat instead.

FARMS AND COMMUNITIES

Purchasing sustainably raised meat helps support farmers who raise livestock responsibly. Given the dramatic shift towards industrial megafarms and the get-big-or-get-out philosophy of agriculture, it's more important than ever to support the small family farms that continue to raise fresh, nutritious meat and produce using sustainable agricultural practices. Family farms also play a vital role in rural areas, stimulating local economies, strengthening community ties, and protecting natural resources for future generations. You can make your food dollars count by supporting these farms when you purchase meat.

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THE MEAT TO EAT (CONT.)

ANIMAL HEALTH

On sustainable farms, animals are treated humanely; they're able to graze on pasture, carry out natural behaviors, and live without undue stress or cruel treatment. Factory farms, on the other hand, severely compromise animal welfare by cramming livestock into small, enclosed buildings where filthy, crowded conditions lead to excessive stress and widespread disease. These animals suffer needlessly so that factory farms can produce cheap meat, and this cruelty is subsidized with your tax dollars.

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

Factory farms have devastating impacts on the environment, continuously polluting air, surface water, groundwater, and soil with a host of hazardous contaminants. Fortunately, sustainable farms recognize the importance of environmental stewardship, and use responsible agricultural practices to protect the environment for future generations. When you buy meat from a sustainable farm, you help support these efforts.

READING THE LABELS

Packaged meat labeling can be confusing. Here are a few definitions to be aware of:

“Grass-fed”

Industrial animal farms rely on corn and soy as a cheap source of protein-rich feed. However, ruminants like cows have stomachs that evolved to digest grasses and other forage. As a result, when these animals are fed a grain-heavy diet, they often have digestive problems, poor liver health, and, in extreme cases, their diet can kill them. Sustainably raised animals eat grasses from weaning to slaughter. Their diet should not be supplemented with grain, animal byproducts, or synthetic hormones. They should not be given antibiotics to promote growth or prevent disease (though they may be given antibiotics to treat disease).

“Pasture-raised”

In general, pasturing is a traditional farming technique where animals are raised outdoors in a humane, ecologically sustainable manner and eat foods that nature intended them to eat rather than being fattened on a feedlot or in a confined facility.

“Non-confined”

This label indicates that the animals had continuous access to the outside throughout their lifecycle but does not guarantee that they actually went outside.

“Organic”

In order to be labeled “organic”, a product, its producer, and the farm where the ingredients come from must meet the USDA’s organic standards and must be certified by a USDA-approved food-certifying agency. Organic foods cannot be grown using synthetic fertilizers, chemicals, or sewage sludge, cannot be genetically modified, and cannot be irradiated. Organic meat and poultry must be fed only organically-grown feed (without any animal byproducts) and cannot be treated with hormones or antibiotics. Ruminants must have access to pasture (but don’t actually have to go outdoors and graze on pasture to be considered organic).

GET THE GOOD STUFF!

Ready to switch to sustainable? Find local sources of sustainably raised meat using the Eat Well Guide (www.eatwellguide.org) — just type in your zip code to find good food in your area.

See Sustainable Table’s Glossary of Meat Production Methods (www.sustainabletable.org/spread/handouts/glossary_of_meat_production.pdf) for more information on meat labeling.

To learn more about sustainable local food, visit Sustainable Table at www.sustainabletable.org

