

Sunday, April 13, 2014

Buying direct from farmers - Consumer Training Modules - Talking about Grassfed

Over the last few years of dealing directly with clients, I realized how much the majority of consumers have been disconnected from where their food comes from. Discussions about cuts and other meat buying terms are met with blank stares. So I have decided to write a series of training modules that eventually will be used for a consumer training seminar that I will be giving in Ottawa later this summer. The seminar will be "How to buy meat directly from farmers" and cover topics such as sourcing from farmers, defining confusing terminology, cut charts, ordering and pricing, what questions to ask and how to make the transaction "win win" for everyone. The time and date will be announced later this spring.

I have decided to start with a term that is often bandied about and equally often misinterpreted not only by the consumer but also by the farming newbies. That term is grassfed.

Most think of grassfed in the literal translation, that is fed on grass ...which is true. However raising grassfed livestock is both an art and a science that goes WELL beyond throwing livestock out on pasture and expecting to have marketable meat of any quality at the end.

First lets start with a discussion of cattle and sheep. Consider their wild origins and how the original animals would have fed. Wild species would travel in groups, constantly moving and eating a range of plants from grasses, legumes, broad leafed plants and tree and bush browse. They would rarely stay in the same place for long nor return to the same place in a year. The area they would cover would be huge and the relative animal density would be low.

Now consider contemporary pasture management especially in eastern North America. Western rangeland is a bit different. The relative animal density is high, the plant variety in their diet is quite limited and the grazing area is relatively small. Unless well managed, animals could be subject to dietary imbalances, parasites overload and poor gains. So dear consumer recognize that the term grassfed is not a guarantee of a healthy, well-raised animal.

At its best meat from grassfed animals is rich, tender and flavourful. At its worst, meat from grassfed animals is dry, coarse and tastes metallic. One of the major differences to quality is finish, the balance of fat to muscle which blended leads to moist, tastely meat.

Yes, I know that many of you want lean but I am here to tell you that you need fat for a number of reasons most of which is flavour. When push comes to shove, the flavour is in the fat. We have had clients demand lean ground. We complied and then got complaints about how dry it was, how it fell apart and how bland it was. Now I nod and give people what I know they will like. If you are worried about calories, just cut down the amount you eat.

The other reason you need fat is to protect the meat and keep it moist. A complete layer of fat is needed to protect the meat during the aging process. If that fat is not present, the meat oxidizes,

goes black and takes on a metallic flavour.

You also need some marbling, the fat that is delicately threaded through the muscle to keep it moist during cooking and enhance the flavour. The reason why Kobe beef is so prized is the level of marbling through the meat. Meat without any internal fat is dry and flavourless.

Now what has this got to do with grassfed? It is extremely difficult to finish meat on grass alone at a young age. Most cattle do not start to naturally develop marbling until they are over 2 years of age. Most beef is processed before that time.

The other issue is it is very difficult to finish meat on both spring and fall pastures. It has to do with dry matter intake and other technical topics which are a whole lot more information than the average consumer needs or is interested in. Think of it this way. If you had a diet of exclusively iceberg lettuce, how balanced would your diet be? You could not eat enough iceberg lettuce to meet your nutritional needs because of the water content. That is the same problem with high water level spring and fall pastures. OK this is a bit too simplified but you get the picture.

The final note about grassfed that strangely Canadian consumers forget about is winter. No the animals will not be on pasture year round. They do need to be fed during the winter. Yes they can be fed grass during the winter in either hay or haylage. They are still grass fed.

While our animals are predominately grass fed, we do supplement with grains during the periods of fast growth and heavy demand on the ewes and the lambs to avoid energy imbalance. We are working towards exclusively grassfed but not before we can manage our pastures in a way to meet all the nutritional needs of our animals without compromising their health.

Now quickly I will touch on grassfed or pastured chickens. First and foremost chickens are not exclusively herbivores. They are omnivores. They do need a balance of greens, grains, and critters to balance their diet. Chickens out on pasture should still be predominately grain fed with pasture supplement. So do not think that chickens get all their nutrition from pasture. They do not. And I would steer away from producers that claim their chickens are raised exclusively on pasture. The resulting product will probably be thin and dry. Talk to a butcher that has had to slaughter exclusively pastured chickens. Our laying hens range free during the days from spring to fall. I feed them nearly as much grain during that time as I do in the winter. Do their eggs taste different between winter and summer? Absolutely. The dietary additions during the ranging period change the flavour and quality of the eggs but it is not sufficient to maintain all the nutritional needs of the chickens.

Are their health reasons for buying grassfed meats? Yes, there is data that shows the omega 3 fatty acid levels are higher in meats from animals raised on grass than those that are exclusively grain fed.

I hope that this series will help the consumer that wants to buy direct from farmers. An informed consumer will improve the transaction for both parties.

Let me know if there are topics you would like me to cover. My next topic will be "that confusing cut chart".

TTFN,
Laurie