

## **Frequently Asked Questions about Types of Beef** *Conventional, Branded, Certified Organic, Grass-finished*

### **I've heard a lot of about different types of beef. What does this mean?**

There are essentially four types of beef produced by America's beef producers – conventional, branded, certified organic and grass-finished. Beef producers have production choices that allow them to provide consumers with a variety of quality beef products to choose from. Because the U.S. beef industry is consumer-focused and market-driven, consumer choices lead the industry's efforts.

### **Are all types of beef inspected for safety?**

Yes. All beef, regardless of type, is subject to strict government oversight. U.S. procedures require that all U.S. cattle be inspected by a USDA inspector or veterinarian before going to slaughter.

### **What kind of beef is typically found in grocery stores?**

Most of the beef you see in your grocery store's meat case is conventional. 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.

### **Why is the term "natural" used when referring to some types of beef?**

Most fresh beef you find in the meat case is natural. Natural beef refers to beef that has been minimally processed and contains no additives, which means no artificial flavors, colors or preservatives. This definition applies to all meat that does not have an ingredient label (a label is added if the product includes a marinade or solution). So, if there's no ingredient label, it is natural.

Some manufacturers use the term "natural" for marketing purposes. To determine exactly what a producer of natural beef means by the use of the term natural, consumers should read the product label or contact the manufacturer.

### **What is branded beef?**

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. Branded beef products are sold at restaurants and grocery stores.

### **Are branded beef products inspected by the USDA?**

Yes. All U.S. cattle are inspected by a USDA inspector or veterinarian. Some companies request government approval of their product label through the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) while others ask the government to verify their brand specifications through the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) process verification.

### **What is certified organic beef?**

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.

- Practically all cattle, regardless of how they're raised meet the national organic standard that requires ruminants to have access to pasture.
- Organic beef must be certified through USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS).

### **Can organic beef be produced conventionally?**

Yes. Some organic beef is conventionally produced, where cattle are raised in pastures for the majority of their lives, typically 12 to 18 months, and then are fed a grain-based diet for approximately for 120 to 200 days. However, these cattle must always comply with organic standards.

### **What is grass-finished beef?**

Grass-finished beef comes from cattle that have grazed in pastures their entire lives.

### **How is grass-finished beef different than conventional beef?**

Conventionally produced beef comes from cattle that spend most of their lives on pasture but are finished on a carefully balanced, grain-based diet. Grass-finished cattle are raised entirely on grass.

### **Does this mean that grass-finished beef is organic?**

Grass-finished beef is not necessarily raised organically. Consumers can recognize organic products by looking for the "USDA Certified Organic" label.

### **What are the benefits of grass-finished beef?**

- As a result of the forage-based diet grass-finished animals receive throughout their lives, grass-finished beef tends to grade "Select," which means it has minimal intramuscular fat or marbling. Conventional beef graded "Select" has the same level of leanness as grass-finished beef.
- Grass-finished beef, on average, can contain as much as double the amount of CLA, a polyunsaturated fatty acid that health professionals believe has cancer-fighting properties, which is also found in other types of beef. However, it is not clear if there is a health benefit in this difference. Further research is required.
- In 2003, a University of Nebraska, Lincoln review of nine studies on tenderness concluded that grass-finished cattle produce beef that is less tender than beef from grain-finished cattle (in both shear force and taste panel testing).
- The analysis of existing flavor panel studies also showed consumers preferred the overall flavor of grain-finished beef compared to grass-finished beef. This study can be found at: <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/beef/mp80.pdf>.

### **Are there lean beef options for each type of beef?**

Consumers have lean beef choices no matter what type of beef they are purchasing.

- 29 cuts of beef meet government guidelines for lean (low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol) – and they include some of Americans' traditional favorites like tenderloin, T-bone steak and 95 percent lean ground beef, as well as newer cuts such as, Western Griller steak and Ranch steak.
- Leaner cuts are conveniently found in your local grocery store. Just look for the words "round" and "loin" in the name, such as sirloin or round tip.