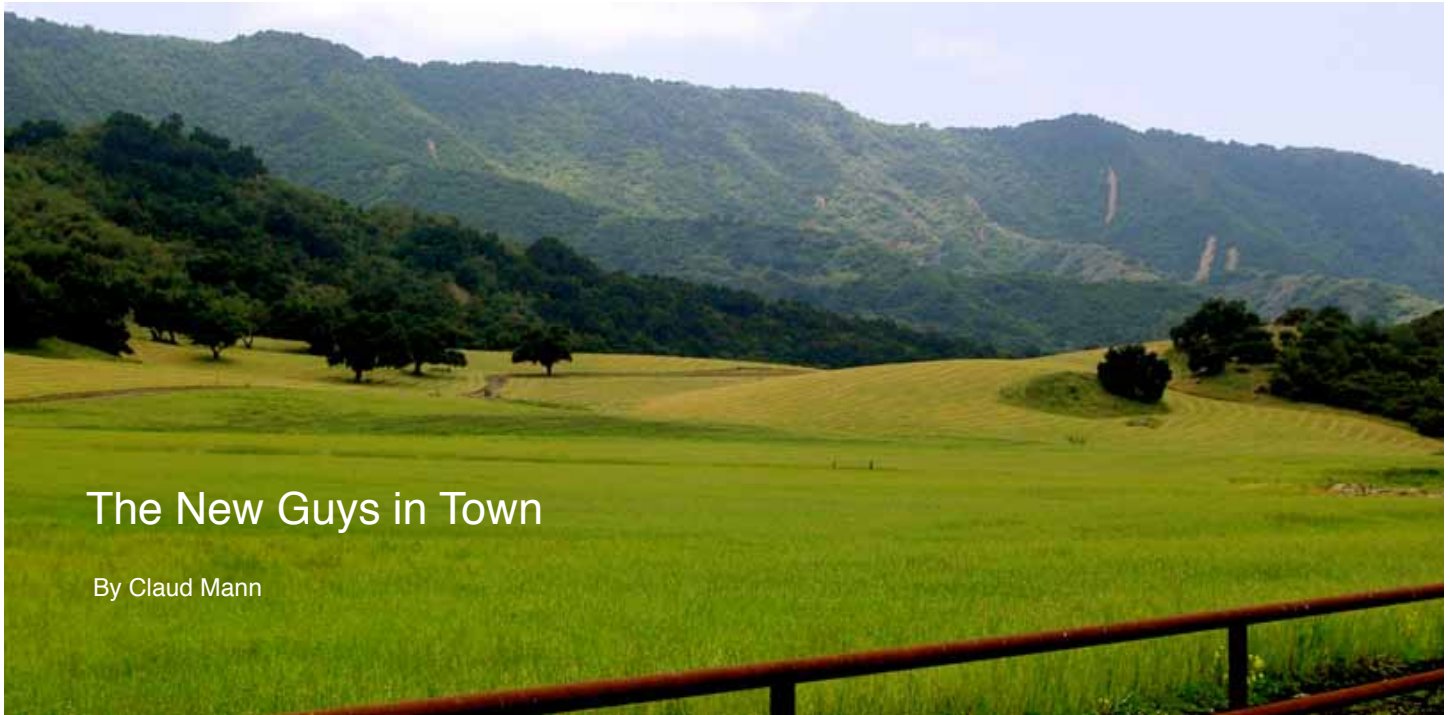




The New Guys in Town

By Claud Mann

I've been having a quiet dispute with a Ventura butcher. We see eye to eye on plenty of other topics; he's a top-notch meat cutter and good guy. Because of this, my personal rule of never irritating anyone carrying a bloody knife has been waived. So badger him I do, mostly about what seems to be a borderline contempt for grass-fed beef. Oh, he has recently taken to carrying some token imported grass-fed Cryovac steaks, but I get the feeling he wants to chuckle and slap his knee when a customer actually buys one.

My awareness of grass-fed meat began a dozen or more years ago on a quick trip to the store with a cattle rancher friend from Montana. We were buying some things to cook on the grill and I naturally assumed he'd want beef. As we entered the frigid air of the supermarket meat section he waved at the plastic-wrapped offerings and said something to the effect of "I wouldn't touch that stuff with a 10-foot pole. Let's see if we can find some wild salmon." I called him a few weeks later to probe deeper. Why would a committed cattle guy have that kind of disdain for beef? "Beef's not the issue he said. My cattle are good eating ... until I sell them."

What my friend runs is known as a cow-calf operation. This means that he maintains a herd of breeding cows that calf every year, usually in the springtime. (Although cattle can breed year-round, spring calves have a better chance of successfully weathering a tough winter.) The calves weigh between 50 and 100 pounds at birth. They live off mothers' milk and pasture grasses until weaned at 6 to 10 months old. At this point they can weigh up to 700 pounds. The males may continue to graze near mom until up to a year old.

A percentage of the yearlings are chosen to remain on the farm for future breeding. The rest are sold at one of the 800-plus U.S. livestock auction markets to buyers known as stocker-backgrounders. During the stocker/backgrounder phase the cattle continue to eat mostly grass, sometimes with supplemental grain. At anywhere from 12 to 18 months they take a little trip to a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation or CAFO (a crowded confinement area with no pasture or grazing land). This is when

the peaceful grazing ends and fierce divergence of opinion begins. The American Cattlemen's Association and many other proponents of feedlot-finished "factory" beef maintain that CAFO practices are the cornerstone of American beef industry success; a steer fed a designer blend of grains, corn, soy, hormones, antibiotics, supplements, plus a slurry of rendered animal parts can attain market weight up to a full year earlier at much lower initial cost. I say "initial" cost because down the line someone usually pays.

Environmentalists, scientists, food safety advocates and members of the grass-fed camp contend that common CAFO practices are inhumane, environmentally unsound and even a public health risk. (See sidebar.) And while it is quite true that one of the hallmarks of grain-finished beef can include a juicy mouthfeel, the tradeoff is that all that juiciness is predominantly a function of elevated amounts of intramuscular fat, or marbling, which also translates to beef that has more calories and is higher in cholesterol and fat and than grass-fed/grass-finished beef.

Grass feeding isn't new or revolutionary. It is simply an elegant approach to raising cattle according to their nature. By not feeding ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats, etc.) diets for which they are evolutionally unprepared (such as corn and rendered meat) the animal, the environment and the consumer each remains healthier. A 2005 joint study published by California State University, Chico, College of Agriculture and the UC Cooperative Extension stated, "Raising cattle on grass boosts the beef's level of a conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a lesser-known but important group of polyunsaturated fatty acids ... numerous health benefits have been attributed to CLA in animals, including a reduction in cancer, heart disease, onset of diabetes and accumulation of body fat." The study similarly concluded that grass-fed beef has greater quantities of beta-carotene, vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids than conventionally raised beef.

The data appears to be adding up that switching to grass-fed/grass-finished beef is a slam dunk. There's one little hitch: We currently have multiple generations of consumers habituated to beef with far less flavor and greater fat than our recent ancestors ate (many

of whom seemed to live to a ripe old age). This hasn't occurred in a vacuum; it has happened across the entire food spectrum. One of the overlooked casualties of large-scale food production of all types has been the near death of bold, authentic flavor. My New Years' resolution: Try eat something every day that actually tastes like it is supposed to. Doesn't matter if it's grass-fed meat, a sea urchin, a head of chicory or a watermelon radish.

Just one more thing (I promise): There is a fundamental misconception surrounding the CAFO versus grass-fed debate that I'd like to address once and for all. It pops up often enough to have become a personal pet peeve of sorts. I've recently encountered what I call "a smile and shake your head" attitude not just from old school butchers, but also from certain restaurateurs and even fellow chefs when the grain-fed/grass-fed beef topic comes up. There seems to be a belief that the emerging popularity of grass-fed beef is a Johnny-come-lately, New Age fad going up against time-tested, traditional CAFO cattle production methods. I think it's the opposite.

The fact is that prior to World War II, all cattle were exclusively fed on pasture grasses. Period. Our grandparents—if we're old enough, and definitely our great-grandparents—were contentedly eating steaks and roasts that never came within sniffing distance of a confinement feedlot. It seems to me that the shoe is on the other hoof, so to speak; the feedlot boys appear to be the newcomers.

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COOKING TIPS FOR GRASS-FED MEAT

Always bring meat to room temperature before cooking. 20 to 30 minutes ought to do it.

Match the cooking method to the cut.

Dry-heat cooking methods like grilling, sautéing and stir-frying are well-suited to lean and tender cuts like steaks, sirloin and filet. Moist heat (braising) works well for chuck, round and short ribs. For all cuts, marinating adds flavor and tenderness.

Be attentive and avoid overcooking.

The fat composition of conventional beef keeps it moist even when cooked improperly. Grass-fed requires about a third less cooking time and a steak can go from perfect to pitiful in under a minute. Sear steaks over medium-high and then reduce the heat and finish over low heat. For oven roasts, lower the oven temperature by 50°. The internal temperature for grass fed will be lower than conventionally grown, around 125° for medium-rare. When turning, use tongs rather than a fork to avoid losing precious moisture.

Rest before carving.

Tent with foil and give it 8 to 10 minutes in a warm spot. This allows free flowing juices to be redistributed. Omit this step and the juices are lost on the cutting board. Keep in mind that the meat continues to cook while resting so remove from heat a few minutes before fully cooked.

Superbugs and M&M's

It's significant to note that the USDA's grading system is the ultimate arbiter of profit for conventionally raised beef producers. This voluntary, beef-industry-funded grading system is predominantly a measure of the maturity, color and marbling of the meat. The USDA links these three traits to tenderness, flavor and juiciness. While there are eight graduated USDA grades, odds are most of us have only heard of the top three: select, choice and prime. While respectably marbled select and its humbler, leaner cousin, choice, are commonly found in grocery stores, super-marbled prime is generally reserved for restaurants, hotels and high-end butchers. The other five grades—standard, commercial, utility, cutter and canner—variously make their way into private brands, ungraded cuts, hot dogs, processed mystery meat concoctions, federal prisons and school lunches.

For steak lovers in the know, however, prime has always been the grail. I remember my father once whispering to me at Berkeley's Star Grocery meat counter that our butcher, Greg, had scored some prime-grade Porterhouse and was letting us in on the action. It had the feel a drug deal. And in a sense I guess it was, given the arsenal of antibiotics and steroids it takes to consistently produce preternaturally fast-growing, fat-flecked beef. FYI—concern about antibiotics isn't just leftwing, kneejerk hysteria (although I'm not above that). According to a 2010 report released by the FDA, the total amount of antibiotics administered to food animals in 2009 reached 29 million pounds, or 80% of all the antibiotics manufactured. What concerns some scientists, including—you guessed it—the Union of Concerned Scientists, is that many of those antibiotics are administered in doses classified as "sub-therapeutic."

Sub-therapeutic dosing—as opposed to using antimicrobials full strength to treat sickness—is commonly employed by conventional meat producers to promote weight gain and prevent veterinary illness (often caused by animal stress due to overcrowding, unnatural diet, etc.) According to a 2003 World Health Organization report, low dosing of antibiotics is of concern because typically some bacteria is killed but not all. The surviving bacteria may then bear genetic mutations that allow their offspring to be resistant to that same antibiotic. The now-antibiotic-

resistant bacteria eventually make their way off the farm and into people through ground water, dust or the animals. In 2009 congressional testimony, the FDA's principal deputy commissioner, Joshua Sharfstein recounted: "You actually can trace the specific bacteria around and ... find that the resistant strains in humans match the resistant strains in the animals."

This scenario becomes more disturbing when one learns that the veterinary antibiotics in question are not used solely on farm animals. Most are functionally identical or in the same antimicrobial class as common medicines prescribed to treat bacterial infection in humans, including Erythromycin, Keflex, Bactrim, Penicillin and Tetracycline. To put it in real terms: In a 2001 study conducted by the University of Maryland with the FDA, 200 ground meat samples were taken from stores in the Washington, DC, area. Researchers found a whopping 20% were contaminated with salmonella. Of these, 84% were resistant to at least one antibiotic; 53% resistant to at least three antibiotics and some had achieved "superbug" status, contaminated with bacteria that resisted up to 12 antibiotics. If one of these was prescribed for an attack of antibiotic resistant salmonellosis you might as well be taking M&M's.

It is understandable why the American Medical Association, the Infectious Diseases Society of America and the American Public Health Association have all called for a curb on sub-therapeutic dosing of farm animals. Citing the above, the Center for Science in the Public Interest officially petitioned the FDA to order a halt to the practice of administering medically important antibiotics to healthy livestock. The petition was filed in March 1999. The FDA, understanding the importance of an issue affecting the health of millions of Americans, leapt into action and issued a response—12 years later. In a letter dated November 7, 2011, the FDA officially denied the petition, stating that banning sub-therapeutic drug use would "impose significant demands on the agency" and opted instead to work "cooperatively" with pharmaceutical companies and meat producers.

Sounds like we'd better keep the M&M's on hand.

—Claud Mann