

## High steaks: Exploring the difference between grass-fed and grain-fed beef

By Lois Abraham [THE CANADIAN PRESS](#)

TORONTO — Shopping for steaks to grill and confused by the difference between grass-fed and grain-fed beef? And why is one more expensive?

A Toronto-based butcher who stocks 100 per cent grass-fed beef argues cows that graze on grass are healthier and their meat contains less fat than their counterparts eating grain or corn.

“Their digestive systems are meant to consume grass, not grains and corn,” says Mario Fiorucci, co-owner of the Healthy Butcher. “It’s not healthy for them and the result is not healthy for us. You are what you eat and so is the animal.”

Richard Bazinet, associate professor in the department of nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto, analyzed the fat content of 14 steaks purchased at outlets around the city last summer.

He found meat from grass-fed animals had yellowy fat, a higher ratio of omega-3 fatty acids compared to omega-6 fatty acids, along with vitamin E and other plant compounds and antioxidants. The fat of the grain-fed animals was almost white, with a higher ratio of omega-6 fatty acids compared to omega-3s.

“The bottom line would be we don’t have the convincing data yet, but based on its composition, its fat position, the other things that are in it, all these plant compounds that are in it, the prediction would be that (grass-fed) would be healthier,” says Bazinet, who also runs a program looking at how diet affects brain health.

He says the evidence is “reasonably strong” that people who eat higher levels of omega-3s do better in terms of heart disease and some neurological disorders.

But you might not know what you’re getting since there’s a plethora of labelling practices in the industry.

“It’s not a lie if cows are labelled grass-fed because they’ve eaten it at some point in their lives. They generally start out eating grass,” says Fiorucci.

“But some farmers switch their animals’ diet to grain or corn when they get older to fatten them up faster. The minute you introduce any corn or grains in the diet they begin to have trouble because giving them something they shouldn’t be eating, the omega-3 and omega-6 fatty ratio changes, vitamin E and beta carotene drop,” he says.

Labels can include farm-raised, pasture-fed, natural and corn-fed. “It’s a free-for-all. It’s the wild, wild west in the food industry,” says Fiorucci.

“Farm-raised is my favourite,” adds the butcher, whose 11-year-old business has two locations in Toronto and one in Kitchener, Ont. “It means absolutely nothing. Everything’s grown on a farm. It could be a multibillion conglomerate, but it’s still a farm.”

Bazinet agrees. “It’s a complicated path to wander through right now because we don’t have regulations. There’s not clear labelling. It’s new, right? ... To make an analogy, you could look at the organic industry 15 years ago compared to today and there’s still some hiccups with it, but people understand it better.

“But it takes some time and there needs to be some regulation and some agreements and some labelling to come through.”

Then there’s price. A well-aged steak from an ethically raised animal can run \$25.

“You cannot produce 99 cents a pound meat properly. You cannot raise animals properly and then charge next to nothing for them,” says Fiorucci.

In Canada, farmers often can’t put their animals out to pasture in winter so they must harvest or purchase hay essentially dried grass and fermented hay, or haylage.

Aging the meat can bump up cost too.

With dry-aging, the carcass is hung in a temperature-controlled environment.

“Moisture evaporates and the enzymatic activity is basically breaking down the muscle tissue so you end up with a more tender meat as well as a more flavourful meat because water has evaporated so you now have a more concentrated beef flavour,” Fiorucci says.

In wet-aging, the meat is vacuum sealed so there’s no moisture loss but the flavour isn’t concentrated.

“On our dry-aged beef we lose 22 to 23 per cent of the weight of the animal, so it’s significant. So not only is 100 per cent grass-fed, let’s say, 15 to 20 per cent more expensive to produce, but then you go and dry-age it ... and it makes it that much more expensive and that much more of a premium cut,” says Fiorucci.

Neither aging method is better. It’s personal preference.

The same goes for the flavour of grass- or grain-fed beef.

“There’s no point in saying (grass-fed) tastes better from a technical perspective because everyone has their own taste,” says Bazinet. “But it definitely has a different flavour. Some people really like that.”

Fiorucci thinks people should eat less meat but better meat.

“I’m a butcher shop and I make my living selling meat. I think the real problem is that people eat too much meat.... Buy healthier, sustainably raised meat and as a result you’re going to be healthier. You don’t have to break the bank because you’re overall going to be eating less.”