

By Richard Bazinet, University of Toronto

## Doctors' Notes: Slow down and really taste the farm-fresh food

Grass-fed beef has more omega-3 fats and tastes different than grain-fed beef but there is no research to prove it is healthier.



There are no studies that have looked into what is healthier to eat grain-fed or grass-fed animals. Richard Baine says what ever you choose, slowing down and tasting your meal has real benefits. (TARA WALTON / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

Summer is a rare chance for people to connect directly with farmers in markets throughout Toronto selling strawberries, asparagus, lettuce and increasingly pasture-raised or grass-fed meats. You might wonder, don't all farm animals live on pasture? The answer to that question could surprise you.

Most of the livestock Canadians raise to eat as meat don't spend their lives in farmers' fields. The vast, vast majority are "finished" — which is to say, fattened — on grains, especially corn. While the definition is not completely agreed upon, the idea behind the terms grass-fed or pasture-raised is that the animals are receiving minimal or no grain and really just have access to what is on the field.

The Toronto Star: [https://www.thestar.com/life/health\\_wellness/2016/07/04/slow-down-and-really-taste-the-farm-fresh-food.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2016/07/04/slow-down-and-really-taste-the-farm-fresh-food.html)

As a professor of nutrition, I've been intrigued by the growing belief that pasture produces healthier meat. So last summer, I undertook a small experiment. I bought 15 steaks from butchers or farmers' markets and analyzed them. Before I share the results, it helps to know a little bit about fats.

People who eat more omega-3 fats have a decreased risk of heart disease and some brain disorders. Unfortunately, the grains we use to fatten farm animals are very low in omega-3 fats and very high in omega-6 fats (these two fats are thought to compete within the body). Not surprisingly, this is reflected in the meat of animals that eat grains. Grasses and other forages that grow in pastures have the opposite fat ratio — they are rich in omega-3s and low in omega-6 fats. So the fat composition of animals raised on pasture should look quite different.

But does it? More importantly, if pasture-raised and grass-fed meats are healthier, do the labels reflect that? The good news is that most of the beef I have tested that was labelled as "grass-fed" did indeed show a markedly different fat profile than typical Canadian beef — and just like the grass these animals were raised on, the beef was much higher in omega-3s and much lower in omega-6s. I did find one very popular brand of supposedly "grass-fed" beef whose fat strongly indicated these animals ate large volumes of grain, contrary to what the label said. I'm working to verify this before I release the name. But all the meat I tested from farmers' markets checked out.

Are the omega-3 fats in grass-fed and pasture-raised meats good for you? This is very tough to prove. In nutrition, the gold standard is a randomized, controlled clinical trial. And in the case of grass-fed versus grain-fed meat, that would mean feeding grass-fed meat to some people and grain-fed to others, then measuring various aspects of health. Unfortunately, there are no such studies. We also don't have good data from people who eat pasture-raised animals compared to conventional animals.

We do know the fat is different — remarkably so. A typical Canadian steak can have an omega-6:omega-3 ratio of 30:1. In the dozens of grass-fed beef samples I've tested, the ratio is more like 2:1. The amount of omega-3s in these foods (beef, lamb, chicken, eggs and pork) has been shown in other studies to have a health benefit. So grass-fed may be the healthier choice — and in the absence of a randomized trial, that's the best we can say.

But the question of good food isn't as simple as which fat is the healthiest. One has to consider ethics, the environment, other nutrients that come from the grass and let us not forget flavour. After all, if healthy food doesn't taste good, we know people will be less inclined to eat it.

Does grass-fed beef taste better than grain-fed beef? Taste is a subjective question. So answer it. Go to the market or butcher and have a chat with the vendor about their pasture-raised meats. Ask them for a cooking suggestion or look one up. My advice: prepare your meat very simply, so that you can really taste it. Even better, compare a pasture-raised meat with its grain-fed counterpart.

While you're at the farmers' market, try something new in the vegetable department, preferably dark green or with a lot of colour in it. Consider a cheese made from the milk of pasture-raised animals. Some markets now sell Ontario wines — why not have some with dinner? While you're at it, call a friend or a family member and invite them over to try your "Ontario themed" meal.

Don't overdo it on quantity or effort. Just sit down, enjoy the cheese, relax, talk about what you like and what you don't like about the food, enjoy the conversations and the wine (scientist's orders!). Try not to rush and take some time between courses — pretend you're in a restaurant with slow service. And then for dessert, how about those Ontario strawberries? I even found a farmer selling yoghurt from pasture-raised sheep that was excellent with strawberries.

One last point: Well-raised food is a good thing. But the way we eat our meals could have an even bigger impact on health. In our search for good nutrition we have reduced foods to pills, bars or things that go in blenders to be slurped in the car as we rush off to work. Forcing yourself to slow down, relax and really taste your meal may be tough at first, but I suspect it's a major key to developing a healthier relationship to food.

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