Why We Pay More For Grass Fed Beef

Why does grass fed beef cost so much?

We all hear that there are many benefits to eating grass fed beef, however when going to make a purchase have you ever experienced "sticker shock" at the price and decided against it? If you go into any supermarket, you will find beef on sale for affordable prices ranging from $.99 per lb. to $7.99 per lb. depending on the cut of meat. If you want to eat the same cuts of meat – only those that are grass fed and organically produced – you will likely end up paying at least double the price per pound. You may think, "eh, it's all the same" and opt for the cheaper product. However, when you take into account the process to produce organically farmed meat (which includes only a grass feed), you may be willing to pay the higher price.

Conventional Farmed Beef

Conventional Farmed Beef is also known as *Factory Farming.* Both phrases refer to the process that most of our cattle is subjected to. Cattle are relegated to sections of land for most of their lives. There is no grass, no protection from the sun, wind or rain. Water is piped to them and they spend their lives waiting to eat a diet that will fatten them quickly, preparing them for slaughter.

This is what an actual factory farm looks like. With no room to graze, move or roam, illness spreads quickly, injury is inevitable and the cows are fed massive doses of antibiotics to prevent the spread of illness and disease. They wait to be fed a diet consisting of corn, antibiotics, hormones and the remains of other animals – the leftovers of the last slaughter. (Image: http://www.global-warming-truth.com/global-warming/).

Over 35 million cattle are slaughtered in the U.S. every year. Twenty-eight million of these cows are raised, slaughtered and sold by only four corporations – not the small town farmer we all envision when purchasing our beef. These cows are fed a diet of mostly corn, which is subsidized by the federal government, resulting in a product (beef) which can then be sold for less than the cost to produce it.

Smaller Farming

There are three basic components to smaller farming vs. conventional farming which results in more expensive food that we buy: the *feed,* the *time* it takes to raise a cow to slaughter and the *space* required to farm the cows. The process for smaller farming is longer, requires more work by humans vs. machines, is generally done by small family farmers and is not centered around a feed diet of corn – therefore is not subsidized by the federal government. Conventional farming utilizes machines, smaller spaces and cheap feed thus resulting in less expensive beef. Both the extra cost resulting from smaller farming and the significant savings resulting from conventional farming are passed on to the consumer at the retail level.

Feed

This is an image of cows out to pasture. There is ample space for them to roam and feed, as well as fertilizing the pasture. (Image from: http://www.deathfood.com/cornfedbeef.html)

Pastoral farming is the process of allowing cattle to roam and feed naturally on a diet of grass. Cows are taken out to *pasture* (feed) daily. The land on these farms is sectioned off and the feeding is alternated by section to encourage even growth and fertilization. This replicates the original method, dictated by nature, on how cows feed. This type of feeding requires farmers to herd cattle for daily pasturing, resulting in more labor, additional time and higher costs to produce beef for sale.

Cows are *ruminant mammals* and have four digestive components. Ruminant mammals chew their food and swallow. This food then enters the *rumen (the first component)* where it mixes with good bacteria and produces *cud*. The cud is then returned to the animal's mouth for further chewing.

Grass is the food that nature intended for cows, not corn. Corn is a foreign substance to the rumen. When corn is introduced to a cow's diet, it results in acid and illness. Furthermore, it also results in e-coli in the cow. *The single, most effective way, to eliminate e-coli disease in our meat is to eliminate a corn fed diet for.*

Feed Additives

As a result of disease from feed, as well as what is spread throughout the feedlot, there are many additives in the feed given to cows under conventional farming. They include:

Type of Additive	Reasons
Antibiotics	Antibiotics are added to feed to *prevent* disease rather than treat it. Because the cattle are housed in such close quarters, sharing food and water, the spread of disease is rampant. However, eliminating corn in their diet and utilizing pasturing techniques described above would eliminate the need for antibiotics.
Hormones	Hormones are used in feed to encourage faster growth of the animal, lessening the time frame to raise them for slaughter. This shortened time frame results in a quick turnover resulting in maximized profits.
Meat by-products	Leftover pieces from the last slaughter are ground up and added to feed to increase the caloric intake. By-products are used in an effort to “eliminate waste” and maximize efficiency. We are cannibalizing the food that we eat.

Organic and natural farming does not utilize any of the above additives in the diet of their cattle. These farmers utilize time and the natural process of farming to allow their cattle to reach slaughter weight.

Space

In a conventional feedlot, the recommended space per cow is 350-450 square feet per cow. This is equivalent to the approximate size of a living and dining room area in an home. Now imagine a 1,100 pound cow roaming in your living and dining area for it’s entire life. Conventional farming rejects the notion of allowing cattle to roam freely because they burn to many calories and don’t gain weight quickly when doing so.

Furthermore, this space has no trees or shelter that the animals can seek out in extreme weather. Also, there is no grass, only dirt they live on. The absence of trees and grass eliminates the need to water and maintain it, thereby containing costs.

Alternatively, grass-fed cows roam on as much space as required to feed them in the alternating sections of the farm. They can seek the shelter of ever-present trees when necessary and don't experience the stress and anxiety displayed in cows living on feedlots.

Conventional farming places the maximum amount of cattle per square foot, maximizing space and profits. (Image from: www.farmsanctuary.org)

Time

In the 1950's, before conventional farming practices took hold, the time frame to raise a cow to slaughter was 2-3 years. Today, it is 14-16 months – about half the time it originally took.

What this means

All of the above conventional practices identified have been put into place to increase the profitability of raising beef for consumption in the United States. The motivation of the conventional process is to decrease the time it takes to raise a cow to slaughter. Up to the point of slaughter, a cow is viewed as a cost. The shorter the time frame required to raise a cow, the lower the cost. The faster you can slaughter a cow, the faster you can turn a profit. It is a manipulative game of economics – played with our food supply. In return, we have increased the beef, as well as human, consumption of unhealthy amounts of antibiotics and hormones as well as increasing the occurrence of e-coli in our food supply all while lowering the cost – and the price to the consumer. Furthermore, we have ruined the soil where the conventional feedlots are located and have damaged our environment due to the pollution they emit.

Bottom line: you get (and eat) what you pay for.

For more information

This process describes the most basic reasons why grass-fed beef is more expensive. There are several other factors that should be considered when deciding what type of beef to purchase, including:

- The humane treatment of animals during their life.
- The humane slaughter of animals.
- The environmental impact of conventional vs. natural or organic farming.

For more information on any of these, please refer to the works cited below.

If you live in Las Vegas and would like to purchase organic, grass-fed beef, you can do so at:

- Costco
- Trader Joe's
- Whole Foods

Alternatively, you can visit www.bar10beef.com for all **natural, grass-fed beef produced by a farm in St. George, UT**. This is not organic, but humanely raised without a corn diet, hormones or antibiotics.

For information on how to **find farmers in your area**, please visit:

http://www.michaelpollan.com/link.htm

For more information on organic and natural farming please visit the following websites:

- www.foodincmovie.com
- www.michaelpollan.com
- www.farmsanctuary.com
- www.polyfacefarms.com

Works Cited

Food, Inc. – Documentary

http://www.foodincmovie.com/about-the-issues.php

http://www.polyfacefarms.com

http://www.nimanranch.com

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Pollan, M. (2005). *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.