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RESTAURANTS

A rare education in beef

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By Steve Dolinsky

April 17, 2009 -- Growing up, the only question was, how do you want your steak cooked?

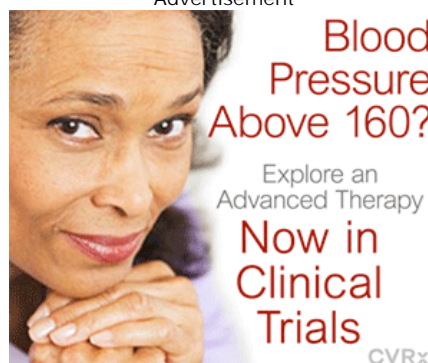
These days, you hear terms like natural, organic, free-range, corn-fed and a host of other labels referring to how the cows were raised. In our first report, we're taking a look at what all those USDA labels mean as well as the key differences between corn-fed and grass-fed.

Steakhouses still do big business in Chicago, but there isn't a lot of help for the consumer when it comes to deciphering menus. Take grading, for example. The U.S. Department of Agriculture currently has three grades for beef: Select, which has very little fat, or marbling, and is typically found in supermarkets; Choice has more marbling, and is carried by a number of restaurants, including some chain steakhouses. Prime has the most marbling, and thus, when cooked, more flavor, since that fat melts, but only about two percent of all beef that's graded is labeled "Prime" so it's pretty rare.

To learn more, we visited Allen Brothers, a hundred-year-old beef purveyor in Bridgeport, which supplies restaurants like Morton's. They also carry the highly-marbled, highly-fatty Wagyu beef, which is the domestic cousin to the popular Kobe cattle which can only come from Japan. I wondered how the term "Angus" was received in the beef processing industry, since it's often used as a marketing term.

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"Angus has nothing to do with Prime or Choice. Prime is a grade, it's the marblization within the meat. Angus is the gene, it's the type of genetic of cattle...they're two different things," said Todd Hatoff, of Allen Brothers.

Grant DePorter agrees. As President of the Harry Caray group of restaurants, he says Angus marketing can be misleading.

"The one thing that gets confusing sometimes is this whole Certified, Angus beef product that's out there. Some people market that as higher than Prime," said DePorter. "There's no comparison

between Prime and Certified Angus beef.

The other big issue is corn-fed versus grass-fed beef. Most of what you see in steakhouses is corn-fed. Corn, after all, fattens the cattle quicker, and more thoroughly. It's the primary source of Allen Brothers' beef.

"It's the safest product that's offered in market today. It is the most reliable when it comes to tenderness, marbelization and aging," said Hatoff.

But by their nature, cows are ruminants, which means their bodies were meant to consume grass. When fed corn, they must also be fed antibiotics, to prevent illness. The only way to avoid antibiotics, according to registered dietician Julie Burns, is to eat beef that's been fed only grass.

"Animals were meant to eat grass and so as a result when they eat grass, they get more vitamin A, vitamin E, vitamin D and then that beneficial fat ratio. Basically, the grass-fed, one hundred percent on pasture-grass finished also, will have a much higher ratio of omega three's to omega six..If you have a too high of ratio the other way, which you get from corn-fed, very pro-inflammatory state; not good for chronic diseases and stuff," said Burns.

That's one of the reasons former TV anchorman Bill Kurtis started raising grass-fed beef on his ranch in Kansas.

"It seemed to have everything that I was looking for, which was a sustainable product, good for the environment because they fertilize next year's crop of grass, good for the family farmer, because basically small farmers are producing it, and these incredible health benefits," said Kurtis, owner of Tallgrass Beef.

Yet habits die hard, and while most diners have only been exposed to the fattier corn-fed product, it will probably take more than science to convince them to convert to grass-fed.

"You can get the same tenderness, the same flavor, plus the added bonus of all the nutrition in terms of the great fat ratio," Burns said.

And a note about price. Prime costs about forty percent more than angus, just something to consider when you look at a menu. Another factor when ordering is aging.. And that's a subject we're going to look into next Friday night, in part two of our steak series.

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