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Choose Healthy Holiday Beef

by David Wortman

For many people the holidays aren't complete without beef gracing the dinner plates. But controversy swirling over the impacts of conventional beef production—and its country of origin—can make meal-planning more difficult.

Conventional beef cattle are routinely given growth hormones and fattened on feed sprayed with pesticides and laced with antibiotics. There's mounting evidence that bacteria are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics in cattle feed, and that the drugs are contaminating the environment, making their way into local waterways and soil. What's more, now-defunct Topps Meat's September 2007 recall of nearly 22 million pounds of ground beef for potential *E.coli* contamination lends little comfort to shoppers worried about meat safety.

Also of little comfort is concern over BSE, or "mad cow" disease. Some American beef products have been temporarily banned in South Korea because producers here continue to use feed containing bone meal, which increases the risk of transmitting mad cow, and in May 2007, the tenth mad cow case was found in Canada. Both instances cast doubts over food safety and our own country's ability to screen for the disease.

While it might not guarantee perfectly healthy beef, country-of-origin, or "COOL," labeling, which now appears on seafood, promises to tell consumers the origins of beef, but the Bush Administration has pushed off regulations for meat. However, the political tide is turning. This year's Farm Bill, already passed by the House of Representatives and currently being debated by the Senate, includes COOL labeling for produce, beef, lamb, pork and peanuts. Such labeling wouldn't cover grains, and with spiraling demand for organic feed comes questions about grain sources from overseas—including China. "Their regulatory system is not built on transparency or the ability to do surprise inspections," says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation. Scowcroft notes that concerns about the integrity of this organic feed have prompted some companies to travel to China and verify that the grain they're using is, in fact, grown organically.

Moreover, beef from cloned cattle could hit store shelves soon, but questions remain about animal welfare issues associated with the process. The Center for Food Safety notes that cloning can result in the deaths of cows, high percentages of failed pregnancies and ongoing health problems for the clone.

Shoppers who are committed to buying healthier and more humanely raised beef face a number of confusing label claims, such as "free range" and "natural," neither of which are independently verified, while cloned meat won't be labeled at all. Among the most meaningful certifications is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "certified organic" label, which prohibits the use of antibiotics and growth hormones on animals and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides on feed. You'll also find "Certified Humane Raised &

Handled" beef, backed by Humane Farm Animal Care, and "Animal Welfare Approved" beef certified by the Animal Welfare Institute, both of which ensure that cattle are raised and processed humanely. Also look for beef raised in environmentally and socially responsible ways certified by The Food Alliance. The USDA premiered its "grass fed" certification in November, but it will take several months before products appear on store shelves.

You'll find producers of certified organic, grass-fed and humanely raised beef in nearly every state, making it easier to shop locally (see www.eatwellguide.org). Find organic beef from **Maverick Ranch** in over 2,000 stores nationwide (www.maverickranch.com, 800-497-2624), and grass-fed, Certified Humane beef from **White Oak Pastures** is available in over 220 Publix stores throughout the South (www.whiteoakpastures.com, 229-641-2081). Shoppers in California and New York can look for organic and Animal Welfare Approved beef from **Prather Ranch**, available for shipping (www.diamondorganics.com, 888-674-2642).

When buying local isn't possible, e-commerce now readily links small producers to the national marketplace. Keep in mind that mail orders involve excess packaging, so reuse what you can, such as freezer packs. Order an organically raised, grass-fed 3- to 6-lb. rump roast (\$5.48/lb.) or sirloin tip roast (\$5.98/lb.) from **Waterfall Hollow Farm** (www.waterfallhollowfarm.com, 870-423-3457). **Genesee Valley's** organic, grass-fed bottom round roast serves four to six people (\$23.25; www.geneseevalleyorganicbeef.com, 530-284-6371). Feed big family gatherings with 20 pounds of beef from **Lynn Brakke's** certified-organic, grass-fed griller pack, including rib-eye, T-bone and sirloin steaks and ground beef (\$6.59/lb.; www.lborganicbeef.com, 701-318-0834). For gift baskets or holiday snacks, **Rosas Farms** produces organically raised, grass-fed Polish and Italian beef sausages (\$7.99/lb.) along with sirloin (\$17/lb.) and rib eye steaks (\$16.45/lb.; www.alrosas.com, 888-353-9912), while **NFR Natural Beef's** garlic sausages come from grass-fed beef raised without hormones or antibiotics (\$8.45/pkg.; www.nfrnaturalbeef.com, 530-284-6371).

For more information, see *The Green Guide's* Smart Shopper's **Beef and Pork Choices Card**.