

Study Shows Consumers Find Grass-Fed Beef Acceptable

High feed-grain prices and the growing interest in “natural” foods have spurred both consumers and farmers to consider grass-fed beef, and a recent study may reinforce this trend.

According to John Comerford, associate professor of dairy and animal science in the College of Agricultural Sciences, the study showed that most consumers find the taste and tenderness of grass-fed beef acceptable in blind taste tests. He recommends that producers look for ways to interest more potential customers in grass-fed beef.

“There are also some important human health benefits related to components of grass-finished beef,” says Comerford, who oversees the University’s beef research and extension programs. “While there is no difference in the cholesterol content of grass- and

grain-finished beef, and the limited amount of conjugated linoleic acid in cooked steaks is too small to do much for human health, there is still an advantage in the increased omega-3 fat content in grass-fed beef.”

Emily Steinberg, who recently completed her master’s degree in the Department of Dairy and Animal Science, conducted consumer evaluations of cooked grass-fed beef steaks and analyzed production issues for farmers. Her work suggests that some of the preconceived notions held by farmers about the physical type of the cattle and the length of the grazing season needed for high-quality grass-fed beef may not be true.

“The results of the study showed that most consumer evaluations of the cooked meat were not influenced by frame sizes of the cattle, weight at harvest, range of grazing period from 120 to 180 days, and final fat composition of the carcass,” Comerford explains. “However, all of the cattle must have plenty of high-quality forage to consume

daily plus be harvested at eighteen months of age or less. None of the production practices or consumer values studied were related to the final fatty acid profiles or cholesterol content of the steaks.”

Comerford notes that these results give grass-fed-beef producers tremendous flexibility in the kind of cattle they feed and the way they market their cattle. “Not surprisingly, we found that finishing productive, healthy cattle on good pastures and stored forages for at least 120 days is far more important to consumer acceptance of the product than cattle’s frame size or how fat the animals are.

“In fact, we found cattle that had the fattest final carcasses actually had lower scores from the consumer panels because of the influence of fat on beef flavor,” Comerford says. “Further research will attempt to reduce the inconsistency of consumer scores for many traits of the meat by postharvest interventions such as marinades and carcass aging.”

—Jeff Mulhollem



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