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Back To Grass

The old way of raising cattle is now the new way—better for the animals and better for your table

BY CORBY KUMMER

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Beef has come to seem a hazardous substance. If years of warnings about the dangers of saturated fat and heart disease weren't enough, Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* (2001)—with its graphic and disturbing picture of the inhumane working conditions of meatpackers and the contamination from criminally rushed slaughtering and processing—made clear that it is unwise if not foolhardy to eat beef ground by anyone but yourself. Then an article last year by Michael Pollan, in *The New York Times Magazine*, told us that corn-fed beef, the presumed gold standard for tender, luxurious steak, is far from wholesome. It isn't very good for the people who eat the fat-streaked meat that corn produces, and eating corn is terrible for cattle, which are ruminants meant to chew grass. Corn leaves their digestive tracts susceptible to *E. coli* and other pathogenic bacteria. Almost all cattle raised for beef are force-fed corn (which costs less to buy than it does to grow, thanks to federal farm subsidies), and the resulting stress makes it necessary to keep them on high doses of antibiotics. "Finishing" for corn-fed beef takes place on vast feedlots, where cattle raised in many parts of the West are trucked to a miserable end. This force-feeding provokes moral hesitations like those raised by that notorious product of force-feeding, foie gras. At least geese are designed to eat corn.

Whatever the current troubles of McDonald's and other burger purveyors, beef remains America's most popular meat. Many meat lovers, alarmed by Schlosser's book and Pollan's article, have decided to go organic—a choice always to be applauded, for the benefits that chemical-free farming brings to the environment and the health of farm workers, and a choice made easier by the adoption last October of a national organic standard. But organic, vexingly, will not necessarily satisfy people who care about flavor and freshness. Once the food industry saw there was a profit to be made, "organic" stopped being a guarantee of attention to flavor or individual care. In the case of beef, "organic" can mean "raised in confinement and given organic corn." And a last-minute legislative provision passed in February, allowing farmers to give livestock non-organic feed and still certify their meat as "organic," threatens to rob the term of all credibility.

There is an alternative: grass-fed beef. Ideally this refers to animals raised in open

pastures and fed grass and silage all their lives after weaning. Grass feeding results in far lower levels of saturated fat and high levels of both omega-3 fatty acids (more commonly found in fish, and thought to help prevent heart disease) and the newest darling of the nutritional world—CLA (conjugated linoleic acid), polyunsaturated fat that may help prevent cancer. These benefits, and also higher levels of antioxidants, appear in all food from all animals that eat grass, milk and cheese as well as meat.

As with "organic," though, the lure of a new market willing to pay a premium has led to fudged definitions. Some meat producers use "grass-fed" to describe animals that are raised in pens on industrial feed, including corn, and finished on rations of grass in feedlots far from home. A similar confusion still surrounds "free-range," which can refer to animals that roam where they please or to animals kept in barns and allowed to range in circumscribed yards. No one regulates the use of these terms, and given how many years it took to achieve a national definition of "organic," it may be a long time before anyone does. Determined beef lovers in search of true grass-fed beef have encountered uneven availability and, occasionally, the necessity of buying an entire side of beef at a time (which requires both a very large freezer and the skill to cook lesser cuts). Economic inefficiency and shipping costs lead to higher prices—the usual tariff for more healthful, less industrial food.

The search is worth it. Grass-fed beef tastes better than corn-fed beef: meatier, purer, far less fatty, the way we imagine beef tasted before feedlots and farm subsidies changed ranchers and cattle. I recently visited two ranchers and the founder of a cooperative, all of whom have taken the purist approach to grass-fed beef. Each has managed to meet three big challenges facing ranchers who want to avoid sending their animals to a feedlot: finding slaughterhouses that will accept and process just a few animals at a time and treat them humanely; supplying meat year-round, although grass is seasonal; and selling both prime and secondary cuts. Each offers an easy way to order true grass-fed beef, a step that should lead to a conversion experience. To ensure satisfaction I offer a foolproof recipe for brisket—my mother's.

Any reservations I have about the ethics of eating meat recede when I visit a farm or ranch run by someone who cares deeply about animals and how they live. Culling and, yes, killing a portion of a herd seems a natural way of helping a group of animals and their habitat to thrive. This paradox struck me when I rode last summer in the old tan Suburban of Dale Lasater, a rancher in Matheson, Colorado, an hour or so southeast of Denver. Lasater, a gentle, witty, contemplative man, appears briefly in *Fast Food Nation* as a corrective model for the beef industry. His father, Tom, himself a third-generation rancher, moved from Texas to Colorado in search of affordable land, and in the 1950s took the heretical step of making his ranch a wildlife sanctuary, refusing to kill predators and pests or, later, to use fertilizers and herbicides. This, he hoped, would allow him to restore nutritive grasses and water reserves to the parched, depleted land he

had bought, and to protect the ranch from developers in Denver and Colorado Springs. The Lasaters were influenced by the ideas of Allan Savory, a guru of grasslands management, who advocated a careful rotation of pastures to allow the natural regrowth of grasses.

Tom Lasater's unconventional methods worked. Even if his fellow ranchers couldn't bring themselves to copy them, let alone to install the miles of electric fence necessary to keep animals in a land-preserving rotation, they respected the health of his livestock, which they bought for breeding.

Since *Fast Food Nation* was published, Dale Lasater has built his mail-order meat business, now in its sixth year, to the point where he can sell most of his animals directly, either for breeding or as meat. The idea of selling meat, something his family had never done (though they had sold dairy products), was inspired by his memories of working on a cattle ranch in Argentina while on a Fulbright scholarship, when twice a day he ate what he remembers as the best beef he ever tasted. Argentine beef, still thought by many to be the world's best, is all grass-fed in the high Pampas. Now that the ranch was raising grass-fed cattle, he reasoned, their meat should be just as good to eat. Lasater and his partner, Duke Phillips, a former manager of the ranch, had to find careful slaughterhouses, and also refrigerators where they could dry-age meat for fourteen to twenty-one days. Dry-aging, a step that was long a luxury reserved to the wholesalers and customers who could pay the added costs of storage and surveillance, enhances flavor and is a necessity to tenderize grass-fed beef.

After we toured the miles of his ranch, where heifers and young bulls surrounded the Suburban as if magnetically drawn, Lasater gave me cooked samples of several cuts of meat, including the first ground beef I'd had in a long time. It was so lean that it tasted like some other kind of meat, perhaps game (wild animals are naturally lean and of course grass-fed, too, if they are herbivores). But I quickly became accustomed to the more intense flavors, and began to appreciate what I had been missing. I found that the brisket—a secondary cut that has more fat and lots of collagen fibers, which turn gelatinous and tender when cooked—had the deepest and most rounded flavor of everything we tasted. Lasater wasn't surprised: it's his favorite cut too.

Tom Gamble has much in common with Dale Lasater. His grandfather went into cattle ranching in the early 1900s, near Napa, California, and one of his father's goals in continuing the business was to preserve the land from encroaching urban development. When I met Gamble at his house in Napa last fall, he described stumbling through many of the difficulties that Lasater and Phillips faced five years ago: where to process the meat, how long to dry-age, which cuts to offer, how to distribute. A slaughterhouse that would treat the animals with the care Gamble wanted proved very hard to find; when we spoke, Gamble was preparing to spend the next day trucking several steers to one in

Chico—nearly three hours away.

His partner in the meat business is Bill Davies, the scion of a highly regarded winemaking family. Gamble compared the nascent grass-fed-beef business to the Napa wine industry in the 1960s. "There's no infrastructure for the little guys," he said. He is optimistic that the market will flourish once consumers understand how grass feeding contributes to the environment and to flavor, and he looks forward to changes that will help small ranchers. Mobile bottling lines have saved small wineries from having to buy and maintain expensive, hard-to-clean, space-hogging machinery; Gamble dreams of mobile slaughtering facilities that will go from ranch to ranch. He himself went door to door to the area's nationally known restaurants, which were more accustomed to calls from neophyte winemakers. He was proud to have created an enthusiastic local market for secondary cuts such as skirt steak, sirloin tips, and even fajita strips. ("Go next door," he said of one local restaurant, "and have an enchilada with beef in it—it's an incredible thing.") Speaking in a vocabulary familiar to his winemaking peers, Gamble described the shift from corn-fed to grass-fed beef as being "like going from insipid hearty burgundy to a Cab that maybe needs more age but has more complexity."

Ridge Shinn, the founder of the New England Livestock Alliance, in central Massachusetts, has big ambitions: to show New England dairy farmers who join his cooperative that by switching from milk to meat they can survive in a steadily more difficult economy. He scoffs at the idea that freezing winters like this past one are an obstacle: "Deer don't live in barns," he says, "and cattle have much thicker layers of fat." While working as a farmer at Old Sturbridge Village, in central Massachusetts, Shinn learned nineteenth-century agricultural practices and became a believer in the superiority of New England grass to any other grass in the country—a superiority, he told me recently, that ranchers visiting from elsewhere enviously confirm. As for the short grazing season, Shinn advocates "long-cut silage," meaning hay baled as soon as the grass is cut rather than after it has been allowed to dry.

Shinn found a slaughterhouse that was willing to follow techniques recommended by Temple Grandin, the autistic woman who has pioneered humane treatment in the country's livestock-handling industry. The slaughterhouse, in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, is just two and a half hours from New York City, the country's largest market for top-quality meat. About a dozen farmers have agreed to follow Shinn's rules, which include feeding calves on mother's milk for at least two months and then on just grass or hay, and adopting certain other humane raising methods. To ensure the quality of the meat on which he is betting the cooperative's reputation, Shinn goes from farm to farm with an ultrasound machine that evaluates the fat and muscle structure of each animal at slaughter weight. Big industry, he points out, grades meat after slaughter; but the cooperative's machine enables farmers to choose in advance only those animals that will meet the standards of the cooperative's Pasture Perfect brand.

Like Lasater and Gamble, Shinn believes that in the long run the only way to guarantee quality is through careful breeding; his chief concentration is on finding breeds best suited to the New England climate. So far he is a successful competitor in the luxury market on grounds of flavor: in a recent tasting of filets mignons, *Wine Spectator* rated Pasture Perfect's best.

Before ordering and cooking grass-fed beef, you have to decide you're ready for the real taste of beef—a taste that corn-fattening has for decades blanketed with an unpleasantly sweet, bland, rich coating. Losing the flavor of corn in beef is like scraping away a gooey glaze. The usual complaint is that grass-fed beef is stringy rather than tender. This can be addressed by careful cooking, and by buying cuts naturally higher in fat. It can be erased by my mother's famous brisket.

Every family has its treasured pot roast, of course, and mine has special significance. At the beginning of their marriages my mother shared the recipe for it with her best friend from high school, who had moved to northern California from the Connecticut town where they grew up, and who liked it so much that it became her company dish. After my mother died, my family had the luck of continuing to enjoy it as prepared by her friend, who became my stepmother.

Homey recipes like this have periodic revivals, especially in insecure times, and they are at the heart of two appealing new books: *The Way We Cook,* by Sheryl Julian and Julie Riven, full of wonderful, simple recipes based on their northeastern upbringing and wide cooking experience, and Marian Burros's *Cooking For Comfort,* with reliable, barely reconstructed recipes from the 1950s and 1960s and her own Connecticut Jewish childhood (shockingly, Burros adds ketchup, brown sugar, and tomato puree to her mother's spare original brisket).

For my **family's recipe**, season both sides of a medium brisket—Lasater's are just the right size, three to five pounds, and well trimmed—with salt, pepper, paprika, and, if you truly want to revisit the sixties, Ac'cent. Heat the oven to 350°. In an uncovered heavy Dutch oven sear the meat fat side down over medium-high heat in a film of hot olive oil. Turn it when it is quite brown and remove as much fat as possible. Strew over the meat one or two medium onions, chopped; two or three medium carrots, peeled and sliced; one large tomato, skinned, seeded, and chopped; a bell pepper, peeled, ribbed, and sliced (green for period authenticity, though I prefer red); and a medium clove of garlic, peeled and minced. Add two cups of water or stock (my stepmother makes fresh, unsalted chicken stock for this dish), cover, and cook in the oven for three and a half hours. After two hours add peeled and halved potatoes if you wish, being careful not to crowd the pot lest they steam rather than roast. An hour later add one cup of sliced button mushrooms (my mother used canned sliced mushrooms, drained—a practice my

stepmother follows despite her Californian emphasis on freshness), a quarter to a half cup of red wine, and half a teaspoon of Gravy Master. You can omit the Ac'cent, of course, now that we know about MSG headache, and water is fine in place of stock. But you should really add the Gravy Master. When the pot liquor is skimmed, it makes an incomparable gravy for a dish that will ever withstand the test of time.

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