

Grassfed Basics

What are grassfed animal products? All ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats, and bison, are raised on pasture for the first months of their lives. Then the vast majority are transported to distant feedlots where they are "finished" on a grain-based diet. Typically, the animals are treated with hormones, feed additives, and low-level antibiotics to speed their production and minimize the health problems that come from eating an artificial diet and living in stressful, crowded conditions. Most dairy cows are also raised in confinement and have no opportunity to graze. Many receive regular injections of synthetic hormones to increase their milk production.

"Grassfed" or "pasture-raised" animals, the kind you will find described on this site, live dramatically different lives. To begin with, they are raised from birth to market on family ranches. Cows, lambs, goats, and bison graze high-quality pasture during the growing season and then stored grasses (hay or grass silage) during the winter months or drought conditions. The animals live such stress-free lives that they are rarely sick and do not need to be treated with pharmaceutical drugs. As in nature, their rate of growth is determined by their health and the quality of the forage, not hormonal implants and growth-promoting additives. Their products are healthy, wholesome, and natural in every sense of the word. (Other terms for "grassfed" products include "grass-fed," "pasture-raised," "pasture-finished," and "grass-finished.")

Raising meat and dairy animals on pasture requires more knowledge and skill than sending them to a feedlot or confinement dairy. For example, in order for grassfed meat to be succulent and tender, the animals need an ample supply of high-quality forage, especially in the months prior to slaughter. This requires that the soil be fertile and rich in organic matter. Also, the animals' grazing patterns must be carefully monitored or the grassland will be grazed too little or too much, compromising its quality and availability. Because of all the attention devoted to the forage, some people who raise grassfed animals refer to themselves as "grassfarmers" rather than ranchers.

Commercial chickens, turkeys, and pigs, meanwhile, are raised in confinement all of their lives. Tightly packed into cages, sheds, or outdoor pens, they have no access to green plants. Their diet and environment are carefully controlled to bring them to market size in the least amount of time for the least amount of money. Antibiotics and growth promotants are used to accelerate their growth and control the diseases that spread so rapidly in confined quarters.

"Pastured" pigs and poultry, on the other hand, are raised outdoors on pasture. Chickens derive as much as 20-30% of their nourishment from grass. Turkeys, more avid grazers, glean as much as 40% of their required nutrients. Pigs are also good browsers and eat a considerable amount of grass. Being raised on pasture adds extra vitamin E, beta-carotene and omega-3 fatty acids to their meat and eggs and reduces the fat content.

What is the difference between "organic" animal products and "pastured" or "grassfed" animal products?

An increasing number of people buy organically certified meat, poultry, and dairy products because they want food that is free of antibiotics, added hormones, and pesticides. However, many organic dairy and beef operations raise their animals in confinement where the animals have no access to pasture. The animals are fed grain and other "feedstuff" instead of their natural diet of grass. Feeding large amounts of grain to a ruminant compromises the health and well-being of the animal, is detrimental to the environment, and reduces the nutritional value of its meat or dairy products. This is true whether the grain is raised organically or conventionally. *The most wholesome products come from animals that are raised in their natural environment and allowed to eat their original diet.*

Jo Robinson is a New York Times best-selling writer. Also author of "Why Grass Fed is Best"