

QUESTIONS TO ASK A BEEF FARMER

ASKING QUESTIONS is the best way to ensure that you're purchasing sustainably raised, healthy foods, and supporting sustainable farmers. Here are some questions to get you started.

ARE YOUR ANIMALS RAISED ON PASTURE?

When cows are raised on pasture or in fields, they graze outdoors and have plenty of room to roam and a diversity of grasses to eat. Cows belong to a group of animals called ruminants, whose stomachs are designed to digest grasses, so it's best to find farmers who allow their cows to graze on pasture.

ARE YOUR ANIMALS FED ANYTHING ELSE BESIDES GRASS, HAY AND GRASS SILAGE?

You want to know if the farmer fed his cows any supplements, byproducts or additional types of feed. On factory farms, cows may be fed poultry manure and feathers, cement dust, rotten and outdated food, and even animal byproducts.

The best answer to this question is that the cows ate only grass, hay and silage. Beyond that, you want to be sure that the cows had a 100% vegetarian diet. Many farmers, including some sustainable farmers, supplement their cows' diet with corn. While this still counts as vegetarian feed, it is important to remember that cows are not meant to eat corn, and a high amount of corn in the animal's diet can make it sick.

HOW ARE YOUR ANIMALS FINISHED?

"Finishing" is the process an animal goes through as it's readied for slaughter. If an animal is finished on pasture, it eats only grasses and hay up until its death and is 100% grass fed. If an animal is finished on grain, it means that for a certain amount of time before processing, it was fed grain. The most common grain used, and the hardest for a cow to digest, is corn. Many farmers maintain that grain gives the meat the marbling and texture that most consum-

ers are used to, but providing only grain to a cow will make it sick.

There are different beliefs among sustainable farmers. Some believe that cows should only be fed grasses because they can't digest grains

properly. Others finish their animals on grain, but they refer to the diet as "grain supplemented." This means that the cows are fed a mixture of grain, grasses and hay. Ultimately, it's up to you to choose what matters most to you.

In order of sustainability, beginning with the most sustainable, here are the options. Each refers to a cow's diet after it has been weaned from its mother.

1. Cows ate nothing but grasses and hay their entire lives.
2. Cows ate primarily grasses and hay, and were supplemented with or finished on a mix of grains.
3. Cows ate primarily grasses and hay, but were supplemented with or finished on corn only.
4. Cows were fed primarily grain with some hay and grasses.
5. Cows were fed nothing but grain.

Nearly all of the beef we eat comes from cows that spend at least some time in a feedlot. Feedlots are where most animals go for a short time before they are slaughtered. Some go for several days — others are there for six months or most of their lives. You have to decide what is acceptable to you — you might choose to only consume animals that were never in a feedlot, or you might be okay with animals held in a feedlot for a couple of days or longer if you know how they were treated while there. Ask your farmer how long his or her cows were in a feedlot, what they were fed while there, and how many cows were in the feedlot.

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QUESTIONS TO ASK A BEEF FARMER (CONT.)

In order of sustainability, beginning with the most sustainable, here are the options.

1. Cows did not spend any time in a feedlot, from birth to death.
2. Cows spent just a few days in a feedlot at the end of their lives.
3. Cows spent a few months in a feedlot at the end of their lives.
4. Cows were moved to a feedlot after weaning and kept there until slaughter.

ARE YOUR COWS EVER GIVEN ANTIBIOTICS?

Some consumers only want to eat meat from animals that were never given antibiotics, even to treat illness. Other consumers are okay with the therapeutic use of antibiotics, meaning that the animals are treated with antibiotics only if they get sick. You need to decide which is best for you. Any animal fed a low dose of antibiotics on a continual basis, either to promote growth or to ward off possible disease, is an animal that was raised unsustainably on a factory farm. This type of meat should be avoided.

ARE HORMONES, STEROIDS OR OTHER GROWTH PROMOTERS EVER GIVEN TO YOUR COWS?

There is only one reason cattle are given hormones, steroids or any type of growth promoter: to make them grow faster. The practice of giving animals any type of growth promoter is not sustainable and should be avoided, so the answer to this question should be “no.” Dairy cows are often given rBGH or rBST. These genetically engineered hormones are injected to make the animals produce more milk. Cows given rBGH or rBST are not raised sustainably and their products should be avoided.

NOTE: *Sustainable farmers are very open about how they raise their animals and grow their fruits and vegetables. Consider asking to visit their farms to see exactly how the animals are raised and how their produce is grown. Many farmers welcome visitors. If you purchase products from a company advertising that it distributes sustainably raised foods from family farmers and ranchers, ask for their written standards for their products. If they aren't willing to share these with you, you may want to think twice about buying from them.*

To learn more about sustainable local food, visit Sustainable Table at
www.sustainabletable.org

