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MEAT LABELS

Read It and Eat

A guide to confusing food labels

BY KATE PARHAM, PHOTOGRAPH BY JUPITERIMAGES/PHOTOS.COM/THINKSTOCK



This year, the USDA began requiring nutrition labels on meat. But some of the language can still be confusing. This guide can help:

Natural: All fresh meat qualifies as natural, as it doesn't contain additives and is not more than minimally processed, which is what the USDA requires, so this phrase is useless.

Organic: The USDA's criteria state that foods cannot contain hormones or antibiotics, and the animals must have been fed a vegetarian, pesticide- and herbicide-free diet without genetically modified sources or animal byproducts, and had continuous access to pasture.

Grass-fed: Nearly all cattle are fed grass at some point in their lives, so this term is virtually meaningless. If you want beef from cows that grazed exclusively on grass for their entire lives, look for the American Grassfed label, which requires that animals were raised on pasture and have never been confined, fed grain, or given antibiotics or hormones.

Pasture-raised: While there is no specific pasture-raised certification, animals raised this way can roam freely in their natural environment. Certified organic meat must come from pasture-raised animals.

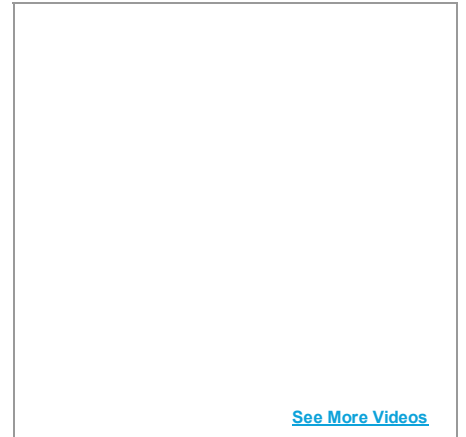
Certified Angus Beef: Nearly 65 percent of cattle are black-hided and receive the Angus stamp, but only 25 percent of Angus-influenced cattle actually meet Certified Angus Beef standards, which are the criteria that truly make a cut of beef the best quality.

rBGH-free or rBST-free: Signifies that the product came from cows that were not treated with a genetically engineered growth hormone that artificially increases milk production but which may cause health problems in humans.

Grass or Grain?

The majority of beef in America is from corn-or grain-fed cows, but some

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experts swear by grass-fed, claiming its flavor and slightly higher level of heart-healthy omega-3s give it an edge. It usually comes from cows that are raised outdoors rather than crowded into concentrated animal feeding operations. (Animals that may be outdoors for as little as the first six to 12 months of life can be called "grain finished.")

Critics say the nutritional differences are negligible, that grain-fed's fatty marbling makes for juicier meat, and that grass-fed meat is often more expensive and harder to find. (You can save money by buying in bulk; some farmers offer "cow shares.") Ultimately, it comes down to what you think is right for your budget, conscience, and taste buds.



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