
THE COMPASSIONATE CARNIVORE

BY CATHERINE FRIEND

An Animal Is What It Eats

The feed a farmer puts in her animal's mouth ends up going one of two places: some comes out the other end, and some becomes part of the animal's body, including the muscle, or flesh. And since we eat that flesh, it makes sense that what I feed my animals affects how that animal tastes. I don't mean to complicate things, but just choosing a farm type for your meat isn't the end of it, since each type of farm can finish its animals any number of ways. A more conscious carnivore needs to pay attention to the feeding options, how that feed affects the animal's health, and how that feed affects the taste.

Imagine a continuum with all grain on one end, and all grass on the other. Factory farms feed their animals nearly all grain. Some sustainable farmers feed their animals only grass. The rest of us – conventional, sustainable, and organic – can fall anywhere along that continuum. Also, grass is a catchall term for anything green. Agricultural folks call these forages, but the word has never stuck in my brain. Grass can be alfalfa, clover, bird's-foot trefoil, and dozens of different types of grass.

First, a brief commercial for the rumen, part of the amazing system that takes the green plants we can't eat and turns them into animal flesh, which we can. Ruminants are animals that have a stomach with four compartments, and that regurgitate their food to have another go at chewing it up. The definition of ruminant is to "chew again what has been chewed slightly and swallowed." Nummy. Humans, thank heavens, have only one stomach. Pigs and chickens are not ruminants, so they can't survive on grass alone.

The four compartments, or stomachs, of ruminant animals are the rumen, reticulum, omasum, and abomasum. The grazing sheep chews the food a bit, then swallows it, where it sits in the rumen, getting all soft, thanks to saliva and the beginnings of digestion, then it heads for the reticulum. When a sheep feels full, it's time to find a spot in the sun, lie down, and regurgitate the half-chewed grass and chew it again. This is what an animal is doing when she's chewing her cud. After the cud's all nicely chewed up, the animal swallows and the food zips through the rumen and reticulum into the omasum for more processing. Finally it hits the true stomach – the abomasum – where acids and digestive enzymes do their thing and release the nutrients from the chewed food.

Cows spend six hours a day eating and about eight hours a day chewing their cud, and it impresses me that a ruminant's jaw can withstand that sort of constant activity without orthodontic help.

How does this digestive system get off balance? An animal's rumen contains microbes with the important job of breaking down the food so that the animal can absorb, process, or eliminate what needs to be absorbed, processed, or eliminated. But with the wrong feed, this process falters.

In factory feedlots the goal is to feed as many calories as possible to get the animal up to market weight as quickly, and as cheaply, as possible. As Michael Pollan brought to our attention in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, when it comes to calories, corn is king. Unfortunately, when fed a heavy corn diet, most cattle today get sick. The heavy corn diet creates such acid in their bodies that their livers blow out. A steady diet of antibiotics is the only way feedlot owners can keep the cattle alive long enough to get them up to market weight. One vet told Pollan, "Hell, if you gave them [the cattle] lots of grass and space, I wouldn't have a job."

A more natural diet for ruminants is all grass, or grass with a small amount of grain. You'll see farmers and stores and markets selling grass-fed and grass-finished foods. Because the government hasn't yet gotten around to regulating us graziers, there aren't set legal definitions for these terms. I've used *grass-fed* to mean the animal ate grass at some point in its life, and *grass-finished* to mean that in the last few months of an animal's life it ate only grass. Unfortunately, I've come across pasture-focused Web sites that switch these two definitions around, so the best way to be sure is to ask the farmer directly.

The diet for pasture-raised beef and sheep will vary from farm to farm, and there isn't any one right way to do this, but the diet for our steer will be considerably different than a factory feedlot. Instead of 95 percent grain, the diet will probably be less than 40 percent grain, and the roughage – in the form of grass or hay – will help the rumen work correctly. Many sustainable farmers feed grain to their animals. Grain, in itself, isn't bad – it's the scale that's important. Too much grain, and you have an unhealthy animal. Too much grain, and you have meat laced with fat. Too much grain, and the farmer uses lots of fossil fuel to raise and transport that grain instead of relying on the grass growing under the animal's hooves.



To Your Health

For some of you, health might be a factor or motivator when it comes to buying meat. For me, health really isn't as important as the other issues, since I've lived through so many food scares and health claims that I don't pay much attention to them anymore. But studies do show that grass-fed meat has less overall fat. A 2002 study in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that meat from grass-fed animals not only contained less fat, but also that the fat was healthier. Grass-fed meat contains up to four times as much beta-carotene as factory meat, which helps maintain healthy vision and lowers the risk of breast cancer. The increased carotene results in colored fat, from "a creamy hue to almost yellow," reports Jo Robinson in *Pasture Perfect*. In countries where animals are still raised predominantly on grass, white fat is considered freakish. As a chef in Argentina observed, "Looking at the fat of a USDA Choice steak is like looking at the face of a dead man."

Whoa.

Grass-fed meat has more omega-3 fatty acids, which help lower cholesterol. Animals raised in factories accumulate omega-6 fatty acids, the "bad" fats, which have been linked to cancer, diabetes, obesity, and immune disorders. Grass-fed meat contains from three to six times more vitamin E than factory meat.

Grass-fed meat contains more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), a fat that helps fight cancer and cardiovascular disease. Meat from animals raised on grass contains two to five times the amount of CLA as meat from grain-fed animals.

Those who eat grass-fed meat can relax a bit about always choosing chicken over beef, since according to the *Journal of Animal Science*, grass-fed beef has the same amount of fat as a chicken breast but more omega-3s. So a grass-fed steak might be healthier than factory-raised chicken.

As for factory meat, what the owners put into the animals ends up, not surprisingly, in the meat. Tufts University researchers have shown that human exposure to the endocrine-disrupting hormones given to cattle can increase the risk of breast and ovarian cancer in women and testicular cancer in men, as well as reduce sperm quality and count. Because of the potential side effects of hormones, including intestinal cancers and premature puberty, the European Union banned them in 1988. We in the United States still use them.* □

*Editor's note: Hormones are still used in Canada, as well.

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Catherine Friend is also the author of Hit By a Farm: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Barn, as well as numerous other books for adults and children. For the last twelve years, she and her partner have raised sheep on a small, sustainable farm in southeastern Minnesota, where they sell lamb and beef to customers interested in eating humanely raised meat.



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