

Selecting and preparing grass-finished beef

By Kathryn Godsiff
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Buying grass-finished beef is an increasingly available and affordable option for red meat eaters these days. It's lean, full of iron and good Omega fats, and is tasty when processed and prepared correctly. It also has potential to resemble old shoe leather if care isn't taken at all stages of a steer or heifer's life and beyond.

While grass-finished beef (describing a beef animal that has only consumed grass and hay) is leaner than its grain-fed counterpart, a reasonable fat cover and marbling within the carcass is necessary for tenderness and taste. There are certain spots on a beef animal that a rancher will look at to assess if fat is being developed under the skin. Ultrasound scanning may also be used, but that will certainly add to the end cost.

Ideally, the blades of pasture grass are in an active growing stage when the animals are grazing. In Central Oregon, this means that the most tender grass-finished steaks come from animals on irrigated pastures where rotational grazing is practiced.

Studies done around the world show that stress leading up to slaughter is one of the main factors affecting tenderness in beef. Hauling long distances, mixing with other cattle, and having to wait in holding pens are all elements of stress. Many grass-finishing ranchers use mobile slaughter units so the animal is not removed from familiar surroundings.

A long carcass hang time of 10 days to two weeks is optimal for tenderness. If you purchase your grass-finished beef from a farmer's market, a store, or in small quantities directly from the producer, it's required by law to be processed in a facility in which a USDA inspector looks at each carcass — which means it will have been transported to the facility prior to slaughter. Savvy consumers ask their producer where and how their animal is handled before and after slaughter. A short transport distance, a well-hydrated and quiet animal, and calm handling at the facility go a long way toward ensuring a tender end product.

The best value in beef is to purchase in bulk. A quarter of beef is approximately 150 to 160 pounds of meat and is generally cheaper per pound than purchasing small quantities.

Once all those packages are in the freezer, what's the best way to prepare it? Grass-finished beef is best served

rare to medium. On the grill, once you've figured out how hot the barbecue gets, sear it, turn down the heat and go for minimum cooking time and don't be afraid to put it back on if it comes out too rare. You can't un-cook a steak. If you have a friend who insists on a well-done piece of meat, ask them to bring their own grain-fed steak. There is much more leeway in the fat profile of grain-fed beef for cooking past medium.

The tougher cuts thrive on long, slow cooking. A crockpot is your friend for pot roast, stews, and brisket. These cuts also do well in an Instantpot type cooker. Don't be afraid to experiment, and do some online research. An excellent article is Cooking Light's Cooking 101 "Grass-Fed Beef vs. Grain-Fed Beef."

Most of all, get to know your producer, don't be afraid to ask questions and visit the ranch if possible.

Slow-cooker beef stroganoff

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| 1.5 lbs. grass-finished stew meat, cut into smallish pieces | 1/4 teaspoon dried thyme |
| 1 tablespoon cooking oil | 1/4 teaspoon pepper |
| 2 cups mushrooms (<i>*This is kind of optional if you hate mushrooms. It just won't be a "classic" stroganoff.</i>) | 1 bay leaf |
| 1/2 cup chopped onion | 1.5 cups beef broth |
| 2 cloves minced garlic | 1/3 cup red wine |
| 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano | 1 8-ounce carton sour cream |
| 1/4 teaspoon salt | 1/3 cup flour |
| | 1/4 cup water |
| | 4 cups hot cooked noodles or rice |

Brown the beef in hot oil in a large skillet, half at a time. Add more oil and sauté onions until soft.

In a 3.5-4 quart slow-cooker, place onions, mushrooms, seasonings and beef. Pour beef broth and wine over all. Cover and cook on low for 8-10 hours or high for 4-5 hours. Discard bay leaf.

At end of cooking time, if using low setting, turn to high. In a medium bowl, whisk together sour cream, flour and water until smooth. Stir about a cup of the hot liquid into sour cream mixture. Return all to cooker, stir to combine. Cover and cook on high for 20-30 minutes or until thickened and bubbly.

Serve over hot cooked noodles or rice. Makes 6 servings.

**I personally dislike mushrooms, so I add a small can of them at the end of cooking, when the sour cream is added. After serving, I pick them out and pass them to my husband.*



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