

La Cense Beef Featured in The Wall Street Journal

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Ordering Up Beef That Roamed the Range

By PETER KING

For some steak lovers, their dinner menu is determined by their dinner's menu.



Steve Wacksman

Pasture-raised, or grass-fed beef is an increasing alternative to grain-fed beef sold in supermarkets and in most restaurants. While all beef cattle eat a grass-based diet for part of their lives, most beef sold in the U.S. comes from animals that spend their last months in feedlots where they are fattened on corn or other grains. The term "grass-fed" beef has come to mean animals that spend their entire lives foraging and eating grass.

Proponents say grass-fed beef is healthier because it is leaner, and better tasting because the cattle eat a more natural diet. About 3% of the beef sold in the U.S. is from grass-fed cattle, according to John Comerford, associate professor of dairy and animal science at Penn State University.

We wanted to find out for ourselves whether grass fed really is tastier. We bought from five ranches selling their own grass-fed beef online. We judged our suppliers on ease of ordering, product selection and taste. We were advised by Ryan Hardy, executive chef at Montagna at The Little Nell in Aspen, Colo., that grass-fed beef grills up faster than grain fed. Mr. Hardy's restaurant is one of a few in the U.S. that serves grass-fed steaks almost exclusively.

We ordered a New York strip and either a filet mignon or a rib eye from each ranch. Availability and prices varied week to week at our providers. All the purveyors delivered the goods when it came to shipping: The vacuum-packed steaks arrived still frozen in insulated containers.

For authentic beef-eating ambiance, we cooked our grub at a backyard barbeque in Cave Creek, Ariz., a cowboy town near Phoenix. Our tasters were all committed carnivores, although no one was an experienced grass-fed beef consumer.

Alderspring Ranch, a small farm in May, Idaho, is owned and operated by Glenn Elzinga and his wife, Caryl. The strip, more than 1½ inches thick, cooked up juicy and tender. Alderspring was out of stock on filet mignons, so we got a rib eye. Our tasters liked the flavor of both steaks, noting they tasted "cleaner," or less greasy, than supermarket steaks. Included with our order were several pages of information about grass-fed beef and how to cook it. The steaks are dry aged, a more expensive process than the wet aging used for most supermarket steaks. Chef Hardy prefers dry aging, especially for grass-fed beef, because it enhances flavor.

Baldwin Farms of Yanceyville, N.C., is another small family-run ranch. When you call, chances are owner V. Mac Baldwin, his wife, Peggy, or son, Craig, will answer. All Baldwin steaks are dry aged. Baldwin's 8-ounce filet mignon was superb. One taster noted the "purity" of the flavor, saying that supermarket filet mignons sometimes have a liver-like aftertaste. The strip was also excellent. Baldwin's shipping charges were the highest we paid, but the price is lower if you live east of the Mississippi.

Hearst Ranch in San Simeon, Calif., and Cholame, Calif., traces its origins to George Hearst, father of publishing titan William Randolph Hearst. It is still owned by Hearst Corp. and is one of the largest sellers of grass-fed beef. Because no cooking or thawing directions were included, we followed instructions on Hearst's website and thawed the steaks in the refrigerator. The filet package leaked, leaving our refrigerator a bloody mess. (Tip: When defrosting raw meat, put it on a plate.) A spokesman said leaking packages are "intermittent problems" they are working to fix.

The strip was the thickest of all our wet-aged steaks and looked most like a cut from a high-end butcher shop. Our tasters judged it as very good. The 8-ounce filet was tender and tasty but a bit dry, perhaps because of the refrigerator bloodletting.

La Cense Beef in Dillon, Mont., which wet ages its steaks, had the easiest website to navigate and included recipe and cooking-instruction cards. Its strip was the best in our test. Big and juicy, it was comparable to a strip at an elite steakhouse, all the testers said. The 5-ounce filet (the only size filet sold) was more like a medallion. Our tasters had nothing negative to say about its flavor, but all preferred the flavorful Baldwin filet.

Ridge Run Longhorn Ranch of Wagon Mound, N.M., had the smallest selection of steaks, but its dry-aged beef was lean and tender. The boneless strip was the most tender and juiciest of all the strips. Ridge Run doesn't offer filet mignons, so we ordered a rib eye, which was extremely tender. Our tasters thought both were a bit bland, perhaps because of how lean they were. Family-operated Ridge Run included pages of cooking tips.

When it came to choosing the best steaks, all our tasters voted for Baldwin's filet, La Cense's strip and Alderspring's ribeye, in that order. But our tasters agreed that all the grass-fed beef tasted fresher and less greasy than supermarket beef.

Where's the Grass-Fed Beef?

Here's how five ranches selling the pasture-raised meat stacked up:

COMPANY	ORDER/COST	BREED/SELECTION	COMMENT
Alderspring Ranch	Boneless 10-oz. strip, \$25; boneless 9-oz. ribeye, \$26; shipping, \$26.11	Angus/steaks, ground beef, roasts, sausage.	Strip and rib eye were tender with "clean" tastes. Also offers "extra-lean" 9-oz. rib eye for \$23.
Baldwin Grass Fed Beef	Boneless strip, \$24 for two 9-oz. steaks; filet mignon, \$30 for two 8-oz. steaks; shipping, \$58.38	Charolais/steaks, ground beef, roasts	Filet was the best in our test. Filets and strips come two to a single vacuum-sealed pack.
Hearst Ranch	Boneless strip, \$89 for box of four 12-oz. steaks; filet mignon, \$99 for four 8 oz. steaks; free shipping on orders over \$150	Hereford, Angus, Shorthorn/steaks, ground beef, roasts, hot dogs, pork products, lamb, sauces	Filet leaked during refrigerator thawing. Strip was thickest of our steaks. Ranch dates to 1865.
La Cense Beef (866) 442-2333 lacensebeef.com	Bone-in 14-oz. strip, \$26.25; 5-oz. filet mignon, \$15.47; shipping, \$15.99	Black Angus/steaks, ground beef, hot dogs, roasts, kielbasa.	Strip was excellent, better than supermarket steaks and on par with high-end steakhouse.
Ridge Run Longhorn Ranch	Boneless 7-oz. strip, \$11.25; boneless 10-oz. rib eye, \$12.95; shipping, \$17.49	Longhorn/steaks, ground beef, roasts, brats, sausage	Most tender of all our steaks, but so lean our tasters said they were a little "bland."

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