

Organic vs. Natural: What's your *beef*?

Growing concerns about animal welfare, food quality and safety have increasingly focused public interest on the methods employed in food production. Specific to beef production common management practices such as the use of animal by-products as feed, the use of hormones (e.g., steroid implants), the prophylactic use of antibiotics (e.g., feed additives), and the use of genetically-modified feed (e.g., corn and soybean) have spawned consumer interest for a “safer” product. For many “safer” is often equated with organic. The Canadian organic industry continues to witness increased consumer demand for products such as organic milk and cheese, organic breads and cereals, and organic fruits and vegetables. But such trends are not prevalent in all sectors of organic agriculture and surprisingly, organic beef is one such sector. In Canada, the domestic markets for organic beef remain underdeveloped, with the majority of the production dependent on the export market and direct marketing. Why have beef producers been relatively reluctant to transition to an organic production system? Well, the reasons are varied but may include: a perceived lack of demand by consumers; challenges in marketing; difficulties for producers to obtain organic grains for finishing cattle; inability to locate a certified organic abattoir; concerns that herd health may be compromised (i.e., lack of confidence for alternative therapies; unable to find a holistic veterinarian) and perhaps one of the greatest deterrents is an insufficient price premium above “*natural*” beef.

For the average consumer, there may be little distinction between “organic” beef and “natural” beef. In honesty, the distinction may be ‘grey’ in some cases, while ‘black and white’ in other cases depending on the farming practices of the “natural” beef producer. The term “natural” is not clearly defined nor regulated and therefore “natural” beef will often offer other information on the label such as free of antibiotics and/or artificial growth hormones. “Natural” beef producers are not restricted from using vaccines, antibiotics, and parasiticides (i.e., dewormers) on their cattle nor are they prohibited from using herbicides or synthetic fertilizers on their pastures. In contrast, certified organic beef producers must comply with stringent production, animal welfare, and processing requirements of an organic standard by a certifying body. Furthermore, organic beef production requires an audit trail and an annual third-party (independent) verification.

Ironically, many “natural” beef producers are already practicing many organic production methods. For example, many “natural” beef producers encourage nutrient cycling within pastures via the use of legumes and manure and are not reliant on external inputs of fertilizer. Many “natural” beef producers maintain a closed-herd, thereby reducing their dependence on the routine use of vaccines and antibiotics. Similarly, many “natural” beef producers are committed to the welfare of their animals by ensuring a proper feed ration, pasture conditions, housing, space allowance, and sanitation. Therefore, why not the extra step to go organic?

The cost of production, especially in the finishing phase can drastically reduce net returns, often below price premiums. An Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) report in 1999 on organic beef production on the Prairies identified increased costs due

primarily to sourcing organic feed and bedding. Generally, organic farmers with the ability to increase their own self-sufficiency (i.e., produce their own feed and straw) have a reduced cost of production. Alternatively, many organic farmers are turning towards innovative methods to finish their animals, namely pasture-finishing and corn grazing. Researchers at the Brandon Research Centre (AAFC) have used high legume-based pastures (alfalfa) and steam-rolled barley supplemented on pasture in the finishing phase for their cattle with great success. Pasture-finished beef is gaining prominence among consumers as more health benefits from the consumption of grassfed products are revealed. Omega-3 fatty acids (essential fatty acid for growth and development) and conjugated linoleic acid (linked to reducing cancer, obesity, diabetes, and heart disease) are found in higher concentrations in grassfed beef than grainfed beef.

As mentioned above another obstacle in the adoption of organic beef production by “natural” beef producers is the perceived compromise of herd health. Expectedly, many “natural” beef producers are already following management practices that promote herd health. Sound grazing management principles, adequate supplementation of vitamins and minerals, ample and clean water, clean housing are proactive practices that minimize injury and sickness within the herd. Increased practitioners of, and advances in, alternative therapies such as homeopathy, herbals, botanicals, and acupuncture complement preventative strategies. (If interested in learning more about such practices consider enrolling in a web-based course entitled *Organic Livestock Production* delivered by Fernando Moncayo, DVM at www.organicagcentre.ca).

The consumer will decide whether the domestic organic beef market will rise and therefore will influence the transition of “natural” beef producers to organic production. However, despite future trends, if interested, the consumer should inquire more about the production and processing methods of their food. Whether, you’re buying “natural” or “organic” find out more about what products and practices are being or aren’t being used in the production and processing of your **beef**.

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The following are suggested captions for attached pictures, edit as you wish, neither picture is integral to the article.

Beef1.jpg – Grass finished beef is gaining favour with many organic producers and with many beef consumers.

Browncows.jpg – Pasture-based beef production is a key factor in reducing the cost of production for both organic and “natural” producers.