

Do You Know Where Your Meat's Been? [or] Think Globally EAT locally

As the eco-living movement continues to evolve, the trend of buying locally is becoming more and more a regularity for consumers. Restaurants and food retailers are touting not only their selection of natural or organic beef, but that it is local and from XYZ Ranch in just the next county over. Grocers big and small increasingly promote high quality, chemical-free meats as organic meat continues to be the fastest-growing segment of the organic foods business. But do they – and we – really know where our meat comes from?

Buying organic fruit and vegetables is now commonplace in most areas, and it's far easier to understand and define what makes it organic: it is grown in chemical-free soil and untreated during its growth. This definition and practice becomes blurrier with dairy goods, as we also must understand how the cow producing the milk or the chicken laying the eggs is fed, where their feed originates and how it is processed. The practices behind the meat industry then become *even more* complicated when not only does high quality meats mean the way a cow, pig chicken or turkey, for instance, is raised, but also how the meat is treated and processed. In other words, where exactly, has our meat has been?

Whether concerns come from issues of health, nutrients, food safety, the humane treatment of animals, or even superior taste, consumers want to get closer to their meat sources. Since labels like 'organic', 'natural' or 'cage free' can imply different things, we're finding that buying directly from farmers or ranchers – or as close to it as possible – gives us a much better understanding of where our food originates. And despite a very volatile economy, and consumer spending decreasing in many industries, demand for meat coming from small ranchers and meat producers is growing. People want to have a connection to their food – connecting locally is the biggest manifestation of that. More and more ranchers and farmers are selling meat directly to consumers, via farmers markets, the Internet, or to small locally-owned grocers in their vicinity who are committed to them and in turn produce loyal customers.

The interest of knowing our food source becomes more demanding when one learns that within the meat packing industry, the USDA's responsibility revolves around setting certain standards designed to prevent the spread of disease – but they are not responsible for safeguarding the consumer per se. We, the consumers, must put our trust in something...or someone...in order to feel comfortable about the meats we buy and eat. This begs the question: Should we choose our butcher or our rancher, just as we choose and trust a banker, barber or contractor?

This article can explore the latest trends, issues and interests in the specialized meat industry, in particular exploring the current success of smaller regional ranchers and their counterparts: the independent grocers who bring these meats year-round to their customers, producing knowledgeable and loyal consumers – willing to pay more for meat

they trust and feel they really know. Following are some of the questions that this article can bring answers to:

- Why and where in the greater Evergreen area is consumer interest in natural/organic/specialized beef growing most? What are some of the specific reasons why more consumers are asking about and buying natural beef in grocery stores, farmers markets and online.
- Why, exactly, is a smaller source better?
- How is the concept of "knowing your farmer" becoming key differentiator in the competitive specialty meat marketplace?
- In what areas are specialty markets making an impact on this trend, and why?
- Experts weigh-in on the burgeoning consumers interest in the types of practices and standards of the meat packing industry (following media attention of "Fast Food Nation and SuperSize Me) versus those practices in a small local meat processor.