



Where's the Beef? Right Here in Your Own Backyard!

By Joan McCorkhill

Finding good, quality affordable beef seems to be more and more confusing these days. Some growers tell you to only buy grass fed beef; others a combination of grass fed and COB (Corn, Oats and Barley) fed. How do we sift through all the information to find the right beef for us?

Zena Dell Lowe of Mission Ranch Beef Co. took some time to discuss the ins and outs of buying beef, whether from a local rancher or direct from retailers.

How It All Began

Mission Ranch Beef Co. was started in 1944 when Zena's grandfather, Almon Walborn, purchased 10,000 acres at the base of the Absaroka Mountain Range and began cattle ranching. He continued until he retired in 1990 when both his daughters inherited the property. Zena's

mother took her half of the ranch and continued in her father's footsteps, whereas her sister sold off her portion of the property. Zena's mom ran the ranch for 13 years until she found she had colon cancer, which eventually took her life. This left Zena and her siblings with the dubious task of deciding what to do with the land and cattle. The three of them had each created lives for themselves outside the world of ranching. Zena's older brother Rob had become a pilot in Houston, TX. Her sister Darcy an interior designer in Billings. And Zena was a filmmaker in L.A.

The three of them decided it was worth continuing the cattle ranch and have each brought their unique strengths and ideas to the business.

Zena states that Rob is the visionary and a whiz with financing. She says he takes care of the details with bank notes, insurance, financial details and is "good at problem solving".

Zena is handling the "box beef" - getting the meat to the market and the consumer, utilizing her marketing skills to

showcase their products and sell them.

Darcy got the opportunity to use her interior design skills with Mission Ranch Lodge, the bed & breakfast that was renovated on the Mission Ranch property. It now boasts the ability to sleep 16 people as well as its own private chef. (For more information on Mission Ranch Lodge, go to:

www.missionranchlodge.com

They have just begun accepting reservations.)

What is "All Natural"?

The Mission Ranch raises All Natural Black Angus beef, which means no antibiotics or growth hormones are present in the animal's system at the time of processing. In addition, all fresh meat qualifies as "natural". Products labeled "natural" cannot contain any artificial flavoring, coloring, chemical preservative, or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient.

Quality

Having been a family-owned Ranch for decades, this family has become proficient at keeping their priorities straight. One of those priorities is the quality of their beef. Mission Ranch Beef Co. specializes in raising tender, high-quality, All Natural, Certified Black Angus, Montana Beef with no growth hormones or antibiotics.

According to the USDA, there are eight beef quality grades. The grades are based on two main criteria: the degree of marbling (intramuscular fat) in the beef, and the maturity (estimated age of the animal at slaughter). Only four of the grades are

actually recognized by the USDA. They are:

U.S. Prime - Highest in quality and intramuscular fat, limited supply.

Currently, about 2.9% of carcasses grade as Prime.

U.S. Choice - High quality, widely available in food service industry and retail markets.

Choice carcasses are 53.7% of the fed cattle total. The difference between Choice and Prime is largely due to the fat content in the beef. Prime typically has a higher fat content (more and well distributed intramuscular "marbling") than Choice.

U.S. Select (formerly Good) - lowest grade commonly sold at retail, acceptable quality, but is less juicy and tender due to leanness.

U.S. Standard - Lower quality, yet economical, lacking marbling.

Most beef offered for sale in supermarkets is graded U.S. Choice or Select. U.S. Prime beef is sold to hotels and upscale restaurants. Beef that would rate as U.S. Standard or less is almost never offered for grading.

Because Mission Ranch is located at the confluence of Mission Creek and the Yellowstone River, this double water access means their cattle graze on fresh, naturally managed pasture and high quality, nutrient-rich hay, alfalfa and barley that they grow themselves.

Their cattle are then "finished" in a feedlot, where they are COB (Corn, Oats, and Barley) fed for three to six weeks to ensure maximum marbling. The beef is then dry-aged for two more weeks to



develop additional tenderness and flavor. The greater the amount of marbling, the

Quarter Beef Package

Mission Ranch Rancher

60 lbs. ground beef
50 lbs. steaks & roasts
4 Tenderloin
6 New York Strip
6 Rib Steak
6 Sirloin
6 Sirloin Tip
6 Top Round
2 Tri-Tip
4 Round
2 Eye of Round
2 Flat Iron
2 Skirt
2 Flank

ROASTS

2 Brisket
2 Chuck Roast
2 Shoulder or Heel Roast

Approx. 112 lbs.
\$660

Other Local Cattle

40 lbs. ground beef
4 lbs. stew meat
2 lbs. fajita meat
Steaks & Roasts
4 - Filet Mignon – 5 oz. each
2 - Flat Iron Steak – 7 oz. each
6 - New York Steaks – 10 oz. each
6 - Ribeye Steaks – 12 oz. each
6 - Sirloin Steaks – 8 oz. each
6 - London Broil – 18 oz. each
8 - Cubed Steaks – 6 oz. each
Roasts:
4 - Pot Roasts - 3-4 lbs. each
2 - Sirloin Tip Roast - 3-4 lb. each

Approx. 91 lbs.
\$700

higher the grade of beef because marbling makes beef more tender, flavorful, and juicy. Ninety Percent of Mission Ranch Beef grades Prime or Choice, the two

highest grades possible, making Mission Ranch Beef some of the best meat you can buy.

Is Local Beef Affordable?

To keep their beef affordable, Mission Ranch beef is sold in four different bulk sizes. This bulk packaging allows the consumer to purchase the same amount of beef that they might buy in the supermarket for less. Mission Ranch's beef is sold at one low price per pound. You pay by the weight, not the cut, meaning that whether it is ground beef or a Porterhouse T-Bone, you will pay the same price per pound. (See box to the right for a comparison with another local rancher.)

Mission Ranch provides comprehensive pricing on their web site:

www.missionranchbeef.com

Are Hormones or Antibiotics Ever Used?

According to Zena, antibiotics may be given to prevent or treat disease, but a "withdrawal" period is required from the time antibiotics are administered until the time the animal is shipped to a plant for processing. The Mission Ranch uses only approved vaccines, antibiotics, or hormones under FDA approved circumstances, and keeps detailed records of any

such occurrences. If a drug has been used, documentation is provided to ensure that no detectable residues are present in the animal before being processed for human consumption.

Grass Fed vs. Grass Fed and COB Fed combo

In an article by another local rancher, it is stated that “*Switching a cow from grass to grain is so disturbing to the animal's digestive system that it can kill the animal if not done gradually and if the animal is not continually fed antibiotics.*”

According to Zena, the only way they switch their cattle's diet is gradually as it would be difficult on any digestive system (whether bovine or human) to switch to a

Corn, Oats, and Barley (COB), which fattens them up a bit and adds marbling to their meat, making them all the more delicious and moist. GRASS FINISHED means that they do not get to eat the Corn, Oats and Barley. Instead, they continue to eat the nutrient rich hay and grass that we grow ourselves.”

What Effect Does This Have On The Meat?

In short, COB FINISHED meat is juicier and tastes better, since there is



new diet without doing it gradually. As for being on antibiotics, Zena states there should be no reason for the cattle to be on an antibiotic unless they were ill and that switching feed should not be a reason to be put on an antibiotic nor make an animal ill.

“First of all”, Zena states, “ALL of our beef are grass fed for the majority of their lives. They all feed on nutrient rich grass and hay that we grow ourselves. The thing that separates grass finished beef is the last three months of their lives. Until now, all of our beef have been COB FINISHED. This means that during the last three months of their lives, they get to eat

more marbling in the meat. But this also means there is a higher fat content. This is not to say that the meat is bad for you in any way! Before you jump to conclusions, see the article on Mission Ranch's website about red meat, and how the fat in red meat is actually good for you. The fact is that COB FINISHED beef are still very healthy! They also happen to be delicious.

For people who are on strict low fat diets, highly concerned about health, or who don't want corn to even be present in the system of the animal at the time of processing, Zena says that GRASS FINISHED beef is the way to go. It is leaner

and contains very little fat, and there is nothing else in the animal's system besides hay and grass. However, the trade off is that it doesn't taste as good. Some grass finished beef actually tastes gamey (like a deer or antelope, since this is in essence what deer and antelope eat). Fortunately, says Zena, “The quality of our hay and grass is so good that our beef won't taste gamey. However, there's just no getting around the fact that it doesn't taste quite as good as the normal COB FINISHED beef. Given the trade off, my recommendation is for each person to decide what is more important to them. I personally prefer the COB FINISHED, believing the health benefits of the GRASS FINISHED beef are not really great enough to sacrifice flavor. But again, it just depends what is more important to you and why.”

Keys to Success

Zena says that there are four reasons Mission Ranch has been successful:

1. God
2. Family
3. The amazing generosity of people providing counsel, time and knowledge. And, last but not least,
4. Rich Phillips (ranch foreman)

While running a cattle ranch can be daunting at times, Zena says that they couldn't have made it without the amazing knowledge and expertise of their Ranch Foreman Rich Phillips. According to Zena, “It is an excellent partnership and he is a treasured part of our family.”

So, GRASS FINISHED or COB FINISHED? Certainly your decision to make. Mission Ranch definitely has a passion for providing top quality beef at extremely competitive prices.

If you would like more information about Mission Ranch Beef, go their website at www.missionranchbeef.com or you can e-mail them at: info@missionranchbeef.com.