



THE ARTISAN BEEF INSTITUTE™

Pssst! It's Not About The Marbling™

When we buy a fine wine, at minimum we expect to know the grape variety or blend, growing region, and name of the winery. Why don't we expect the same with beef?

WHAT IS ARTISAN BEEF?

Artisan Beef starts where naturally raised beef stops. We begin with ranchers who raise livestock without the use of growth promoters and preventative antibiotics but go on to consider several other factors that influence the flavor and texture of meat, including the priorities of the producers.

Below is a list of questions that a top-notch rancher, retailer, butcher, chef, or online shop should be able to answer. When we ask these questions, we also ask ourselves, are the producers in the business of raising protein that fits a certain government label such as grass-fed, USDA Grade (Prime, Choice, Select), or organic? Or are the ranchers, truckers, slaughterhouses, and butchers working together as a team to create a signature style flavor and texture of beef? The latter are the ones producing Artisan Beef.

- ❑ **NAME OF FARM:** Your beef should be traceable to the originating farm or ranch. Most ranchers raise calves that are then sent to a new location for a few months to be fattened to market weight. This new location may be a feedlot or a grass-finisher (grazier). Ask if the beef was raised in more than one place. The meat seller should be able to tell you the name of each. If they source from multiple farms, they should ideally be able to tell you which specific farm(s) produced the beef for sale.
- ❑ **BREED:** Look for a farm that specializes in raising a single breed or crossbreed. There are hundreds of breeds and blends each with different characteristics. There is no "best" breed or crossbreed but you do want some consistency in the herd. Also, don't be satisfied with "Angus" as the term is often used very loosely. If the answer is Angus or another specific breed, such as Charolais or Highland, ask if it's purebred or a crossbreed and the name of the other breed.
- ❑ **GROWING REGION:** Different breeds were developed to thrive in different climates or geographical regions. The seller should be able to tell you **why this breed or crossbreed is well suited to his or her particular growing region.**
- ❑ **MEDICAL RECORD:** Confirm that **no antibiotics were used to prevent** cattle from getting sick and that **no supplemental growth hormones ("implants") or beta agonists** were used, **ever.** Some ranchers, under advisement from veterinarians, will treat animals that become sick with antibiotics (similar to what we do for ourselves). If you want cattle that have never been treated with antibiotics, you should confirm that the producer segregates and removes treated cattle from his or her program.
- ❑ **VEGETABLE DIET:** This is a complicated area. At minimum, the feed should be of high quality and **free of any animal, poultry, or fish-based sources.** Ask how the seller ensures that the feed does not contain any of these by-products. See our separate guide to learn specific questions to ask with regard to diet.
- ❑ **LOW STRESS:** Stress can ruin the taste & texture of beef. It can be inborn, man-made, or from a natural event. Top ranchers will remove cattle with poor temperaments from their herd. **Also, look for a seller who can tell you name of the trucker and the slaughterhouse used.** While not a guarantee, we find it indicates that low stress is important. Cattle do not like to encounter new experiences. Ask how cattle are moved and the steps taken to ensure low-stress at each stage. Have cattle previously been introduced to chutes or ramps? In our opinion, cattle should never be yelled at or prodded with electric sticks.
- ❑ **PROPER AGING & CUTTING:** A butcher can have a huge impact on flavor and texture. He or she should be an expert in aging beef as it is critical to tenderness and flavor enhancement. **As a general rule, look for beef that has been wet-aged or dry-aged for at least 10 days. It's also important to not over-age beef, in particular with very lean carcasses. An artisan butcher will be able to recommend the optimal aging time and technique.** The butcher should also be an expert in cutting beef (e.g. uniformly thick steaks) and know how to minimize waste. Dry-aged beef will often have layered flavors, what's called an adventurous Personality, as the aging process concentrates the natural flavors in the beef (similar to condensing soup).

OTHER CRITERIA TO CONSIDER

- ❑ **Certified Organic:** Organic means, among other criteria, that a third party has certified that certain pesticides and herbicides and no genetically modified organisms were used in producing the beef. Some follow organic practices but are not certified.
- ❑ **Certified Humane:** There are several organizations that certify farms, truckers, and slaughterhouses for humane treatment.
- ❑ **Pasture Raised & Finished:** If you want beef raised 100% on pasture, make sure to confirm the cattle were both raised *and* finished on pasture. This does not always equate to grass-fed beef; some cattle are fed supplemental grain while on pasture.
- ❑ **Grass-Only Beef:** It's important to know that all cattle are fed grass. Most are finished on a diet of grasses and grains. If you want beef from cattle that never ate grain and the beef does not carry a certified grass-fed label, ask the purveyor to confirm that it was raised on a grass-only diet for 100% of its life.
- ❑ **Seasonality:** Beef, especially grass-finished beef, is a seasonal food. Grasses change by season and vary by growing region. When looking for grass-only beef, consider the fact that flavor may vary among different seasons.
- ❑ **Packaging & Freezing:** If you find a beef that you particularly enjoy, we recommend buying in bulk as you will save money and have your favorite beef in the freezer. To ensure a long shelf life, ideally look for beef that has been vacuum-sealed and blast frozen. Blast (very fast) freezing will minimize if not reduce completely the number and size of ice crystals that can form during the freezing process. Vacuum-sealed packaging will help keep your beef in peak condition in the freezer for a very long time (at least 12 months for steaks). Another good option is a heavy grade of freezer paper and tape, properly wrapped.