

The Oregonian

Meat market

08/12/03

Stories by LESLIE COLE

When Cheryl Paulsen made lasagna in the past, she'd stop at the local grocery for ground beef. Now, the Clackamas woman heads to her garage for a vacuum-sealed pack of grass-fed, hormone-free Oregon-grown meat, part of the quarter side of beef that fills two shelves in her upright freezer.

She knows the farmer who raised the cow, what it ate and how it was treated. And she's confident the pasture-raised meat, from Adams Creek Enterprises in Yoncalla, is good for her 2-year-old daughter, Emily.

"After our daughter was born, I really got concerned about the amount of chemicals in our food," says Paulsen, a computer programmer for U.S. Bank.

In a time when low-carb is king, buying directly from the farm is but one new wrinkle in the way Americans are buying meat. And while the choices aren't as confounding as shopping the supermarket cereal aisles, they are definitely growing.

Along with farm-direct, there's grass-fed beef, appealing for its benefits to people and the planet and piquing the interest of players like Niman Ranch and Whole Foods. Free-range chicken breasts beckon from farmers market stalls. And "natural" meat, which hasn't been shot full of antibiotics, is sold at specialty markets, grocery stores, and soon, we're told, at McDonald's. Even the corner Safeway boasts Certified Angus Beef.

Buying directly from the farm is particularly popular here in the Northwest. Fewer than 50 Oregon farms sell directly to consumers, and supplies are small and seasonal, so it's a long way from being anything but a niche market. But interest is growing, especially among young couples looking for alternatives for their growing families.

Matthew Buck and Courtney Ferrari started buying farm-direct meat after daughter Helen -- "a die-hard carnivore," says Ferrari -- was born three-and-a-half years ago and they found themselves in a quandary.

They'd been driving across town for sustainably grown hot dogs. "We were too cost-conscious to buy the stuff for ourselves, but we were buying it for our daughter," says Buck, 36.

The Southeast Portland couple started ordering chickens a few at a time from Wood Family Farm outside Salem, a deal arranged by a Portland friend.

For the last two years, they've filled their 10-cubic-foot chest freezer to the groaning point, with a whole lamb, a turkey, more than a dozen chickens and half a pig. This year they're one of eight Portland households splitting a 900-pound cow -- that's about 45 pounds of packaged meat per family -- purchased from Diane Snyder, a fourth-generation rancher in Wallawa County.

"We did the math," says Buck. "We could see that by buying direct we were going to get what was essentially an organic product, a very high-quality product, below retail cost."

The couple spent an average of \$2 to \$2.50 per pound on all the meat in their freezer last year. The beef they expect this summer -- a mix of roasts, steaks, ribs and ground meat, will run about \$2.80 a pound.

Additional savings come, says Buck, at the supermarket. "We go to the store and we're strictly focused on fresh produce, and so our grocery bills have plummeted." And then there's the taste. The pork, from one of 14 pigs raised by Dan and Jodine Wood last year, is marbled a bit, making it full-flavored and tender, says Ferrari. The bacon has a significantly higher proportion of meat -- about 80 percent -- than most supermarket brands.

But health reasons are what usually push people into buying meat this way.

Interest in "natural meat" -- not the USDA definition but a term some stores and producers use for meat raised without added hormones and antibiotics -- often starts when a couple is expecting a baby. But they end up buying it for themselves, says Laurie DeMerritt of The Hartman Group, a market research firm in Washington, D.C.

Even though buying direct is often cheaper than the natural foods stores, it's still spendy, at around \$2 per pound for a whole chicken. To get the best deals, you need to buy in bulk -- and have the freezer space to store it.

"Obviously we're not trying to compete with Fred Meyer," says Richard Malinowski, who sells about 20 head of grass-fed organic beef cattle each year from his farm in Northwest Portland.

"People can certainly go out and get meat cheaper. . . . But we've had people who say, I can't eat regular hamburger (because of the higher fat content), but I can eat yours."

Nationwide, about 1,000 small producers direct-sell pasture-raised meat, estimates Jo Robinson, whose Web site, www.eatwild.com, lists 500 farmers with grass-fed livestock. The meat, from cows, pigs and chickens allowed to graze on open pastures rather than raised nose-to-tail in feedlots or indoors, is also embraced by socially conscious restaurant chefs on both coasts, including Greg Higgins of Higgins restaurant in downtown Portland. The Eat Wild Web site gets 1,500 hits a day, Robinson says. "Two years ago, it was, like, 10. The interest is phenomenal."

Struggling family farmers hope the new niche market will keep them afloat. "There's a lot of farmers who think they can raise a better-quality meat product in a humane way, and they're trying to connect with consumers," says Jonathan Moscatello, who works with Northwest farmers on behalf of The Food Alliance, a nonprofit that markets sustainably grown food.

City folks who want to buy meat from a small, pasture-based farm run up against obstacles. Supplies are small -- most farms raise and sell fewer than 100 animals each year -- and the meat is seasonal: lamb in spring and fall, pork in fall, beef in mid- to late summer, chicken late spring into fall. And if they're buying off the farm, instead of at a farmers market, they'll need to pick up the meat or arrange for delivery, and have enough room in a freezer to store it.

It's not hard to understand why Fred Meyer spokesman Rob Boley says he doesn't see farm-direct meat as "a significant competitive factor at this time."

To get a sense of where the farmer-to-consumer meat trend fits in the U.S. market, consider that in 2000, organic meat sales comprised about one-tenth of 1 percent of total retail meat, poultry and seafood sales, according to a study funded by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

But demand is growing. Dan and Jodine Woods, who with their three children raise lamb, pork and poultry on 90 acres in Turner, sold 70 chickens four years ago. Last year, "we did about 600," says Jodine, who grew up on a farm five miles down the road. Turkey orders went from 25 two years ago to 65 last year, and she says they probably could have sold 100.

One thing holding Northwest farmers back is meat processing. "It's difficult to find a processing facility available to the small-scale grower," says Leslie Zenz, small farm and direct-marketing program manager with the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

And in the case of beef, pork or lamb, if it's not processed under inspection at a USDA facility -- an added cost for small farmers -- federal laws prohibit the grower from selling packaged meat by the piece. So what some do is sell live animals, then arrange for processing, which the customer pays for at a state-inspected facility, sometimes a mobile operation that comes to the farm.

Custom-slaughter operations are licensed by the Oregon Department of Agriculture, but they don't have a federal meat inspector on site. So customers need to take a close look at both who's selling the meat and how it's handled once it leaves the farm. "Ideally, they would see the animal, they would see the condition in which it was raised," says Zenz.

For some farm-direct buyers, the connection with a farmer is more important than a USDA label. "Part of getting involved in direct meat for me is taking responsibility myself for food safety," says Buck. "I've met Diane (Snyder). I've seen her ranch. So I just feel really good about supporting her."

Heather Lang, a program supervisor at Mount Hood Community College, says she turned to farm-direct meat after reading "Fast Food Nation," Eric Schlosser's 2001 expose of the U.S. meat industry.

She and husband Mark McCollister, both 33, and daughter Kali, 4, also like the community spirit behind direct meat. On a winter pick-up day for last year's 250-pound pig, the four families splitting it gathered on Lang's front porch, juggling garbage bags and paper-wrapped packages.

"Someone would say, 'I've got a shoulder over here, show me a butt' " she says with a laugh.

Some farmers say they count former vegetarians among their new customers.

"We have a running joke about getting a Polaroid for the 'wall of conversions,' " says Kelly Silverman of Creative Growers in Noti west of Eugene, which sells pastured poultry under the Greener Pastures label. They come back to meat wanting more protein in their diets, says Silverman, but they keep eating it because the pastured animals, which get more exercise and supplement their diet with grass, just taste good.

Lawrence Cyphers, a meat cutter at Gartner's Country Meat Market, says although he loves the taste of "natural birds," the chicken might not appeal to a generation that's grown up on fast food. "Some of it's a little gamier," he says.

And let's face it: Buying a half a pig or a quarter side of beef is daunting for even accomplished cooks, not to mention the hassle factor. Buyers have to pick up their meat on the farm, which can be a long drive from Portland, or at an agreed-upon drop-off point in town. And they have to sink hundreds of dollars into a freezer if they don't have one.

When the animal's ready, the buyer hashes out details with the butcher. You can get three ribs to

a package or five, or request extra-thick pork chops. If you want more hams, you get fewer pork roasts. You can ask the butcher for a whole leg of lamb or one that's butterflied, bone-in. Occasionally buyers scurry through reference books to figure out what to do with unfamiliar cuts.

Lang and McCollister bring in professionals. "We call our chef friend (Patrick Fleming at Bluehour) and say, 'What do we do with a breast of lamb?' " (Answer: braise it.)

Or it's trial and error.

Ferrari says two years ago they requested pork scraps from their butcher to make their own sausage. "It was really fun. Once. And now we get the butcher to do it for us."

Leslie Cole: 503-294-4069; lesliecole@news.oregonian.com

Copyright 2003 Oregon Live. All Rights Reserved.