

LET'S TALK
ABOUT EATING...

BEEF

It has become an increasingly hot topic – can you still enjoy that steak or burger with a clear conscience? *Clare Finney* investigates...



WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

Beef is one of the most controversial meats you can eat these days – largely because of concerns over its environmental impact. There are issues to consider around animal welfare, too, especially in intensive farms in continental Europe, Australia and the Americas. Yet it is where and how our food is produced that “makes a huge difference when it comes to environmental and climate impact,” points out Stuart Roberts, deputy president of the National Farmers’ Union. The good news, he says, is that some of the major concerns can be reduced when buying British: “Those large-scale systems found in Australia, or the deforestation caused by cattle farming in Brazil, are significantly different to UK production systems.”

WHAT ARE THE MAIN ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS?

Farming these big animals takes up a lot of land, which has led to deforestation in parts of the world. Cows also emit high levels of the greenhouse gas methane as part of their digestion: far more than any other animal. Furthermore, in many countries, they’re fed grain and soy. Growing and transporting these feeds in the vast quantities necessary for intensive farming has serious environmental implications.

WHAT ABOUT BRITISH BEEF?

In Britain, beef cattle are almost always grazed outside on grass (known as pasture) during the spring and summer months, before being moved indoors for the winter. This means they’re not as reliant on grain and soy. Farms in the UK are also relatively small, often with no more than 400 animals per farm – unlike those in the Americas and Australia, where you might find 30,000-100,000 animals crowded together. Generally speaking, the result is higher animal welfare standards and less »

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environmental impact; greenhouse gas emissions from UK beef are about half the global average, according to the Government's Committee on Climate Change. While such issues are something to bear in mind when deciding whether to eat beef, Britain is "leading the way when it comes to climate-friendly, high-welfare meat production," says Stuart.

HOW DOES WAITROSE FIT IN?

Where other retailers source from a range of processors across Ireland and the UK, Waitrose has worked with the same beef supplier, Dovecote Park, for more than 25 years. This means you can be assured of certain standards regardless of whether you're buying Essential meatballs or No.1 côte de boeuf. The standards exceed the minimum set out by the Red Tractor

Association (a British food standards regulator), with Waitrose cattle getting around 30% more space than required. All are native breeds (which means they are naturally suited to the British climate and pasture) and have a grass-based diet that is supplemented by grain in winter but does not use soy. Dovecote Park always uses the whole animal: whatever isn't supplied as cuts of beef goes into ready meals, burgers or meatballs. This means no waste, and that "no matter what you're buying, high welfare is guaranteed," says Jake Pickering, Waitrose's senior agricultural manager.

CAN I EAT BEEF AS PART OF A SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE?

The UK government is encouraging us to cut down on red meat, for health as well as environmental reasons (see page 102). Tim

Lang is professor of food policy at City, University of London and the author of *Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them*. He believes there is "overwhelming evidence that humans need to reduce the amount of cattle consumed."

"If you want to eat beef at all, it should be as a feast day food not an everyday food," says Tim. "And it's not as simple as choosing whether or not to eat it. "There are big differences in how cattle are reared, too. Intensive versus extensive rearing, pasture-fed versus bought-in grain – these all have an impact. 'Less, but better' is the general message."

Beef that is British, native-bred, pasture-reared or organic is usually the best bet from a sustainability perspective. "Grazing cattle form an integral part of the ecosystem. Their waste is vital to soil

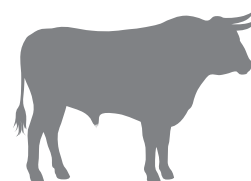


**BEEF IS THE
THIRD MOST
POPULAR**
MEAT IN THE WORLD,
AFTER PORK AND CHICKEN

THE UK IS 75% SELF-SUFFICIENT IN BEEF



BEEF BY NUMBERS



All cattle are descended from as few as 80 animals that were domesticated from wild oxen around 10,500 years ago.



The biggest beef-producing country in the world is the United States, shortly followed by Brazil.



There is a British cattle passport system in the UK. It records the cow's breed and date of birth and ensures it can be traced to its mother.

health, improving the biological, chemical and physical properties, and boosts levels of organic matter," says Kate Sutton, Dovecote Park's procurement manager.

"In North Yorkshire and the East Midlands, where many of our cattle are farmed, they are grazing land that isn't suitable for crops," she adds. The key here is that cattle transform energy humans can't use – grass – into something we can eat, and means areas of land that do not otherwise lend themselves to food production are being utilised.

Some people argue that healthy soil grazed by animals also helps absorb carbon that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere – though there's still a lot of research to be done in this area.

ARE THERE ANY LABELS THAT I SHOULD LOOK FOR?

There isn't strict legislation around beef labelling in the same way as there is for other meats, because, as Jake says, "beef farming systems are infinitely more variable, so retailers don't categorise them in the same way. You can look for things like grass-fed, dry-aged and so on, but these aren't defined by law." That said, 'Red Tractor' means 'British' – and an adherence to standards that will likely be above imported beef – and of course there is organic, which is legally defined and means there has been no routine use of antibiotics and both the pasture and feed are free from chemicals. Price differences tend to reflect the breed, ageing and cut.

No.1 beef, for example, comes from prized Hereford cattle and is dry-aged for 30 days, deepening the flavour.

SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS?

It depends where you're shopping. In 2019, the Save Our Antibiotics organisation declared that Waitrose had the most comprehensive antibiotic policies of all supermarket retailers and is one of only a few to have an outright ban on the use of Critically Important Antibiotics – those reserved for human health. "We don't use growth-promoting hormones either," says Jake. "They have been banned in the UK since 1981 – but they are still used in the United States." »

KNOW YOUR BREEDS



◀ Hereford

Instantly recognisable by its rusty red coat and white face, the Hereford is one of our most prestigious breeds, dating back to the 18th century. Hereford beef is loved for its superb marbling, producing meltingly juicy steaks.



▲ Aberdeen Angus

A hardy native breed – the clue's in the name – the Aberdeen Angus has long been renowned for its ability to thrive in Britain's inclement weather. The meat marries tenderness and flavour, with a decent marbling of fat.

Welsh Black ▶
Known as the black gold from the Welsh hills – on account of having once been used as currency – the Welsh Black have existed in Wales since pre-Roman times. They are adept at surviving on harsh heathland and moorland, converting poor-quality grass and shrubs into flavoursome beef. This is one of Waitrose's regional breeds, available only to customers in Wales.



Highland ▶

One of the most distinctive cattle around, with their characteristic long hair and upturned horns. The long grazing period results in lean meat. You can often find this beef via the Made to Order service at Christmas.



▲ West Country ▶

West Country beef is sourced from South Devon and red ruby Devon cattle; they have to live their whole life in the area and be fed at least a 70% forage-based diet to classify. This breed is also among Waitrose's regional offerings.

