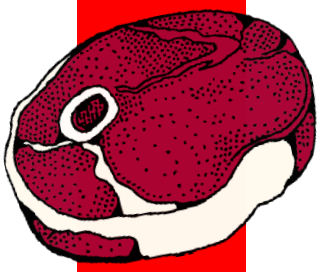
Grain-fed vs. Grass-fed

Most lambs are grass-fed, but some spend their entire lives eating grass while others are finished on concentrate (grain) diets or supplemented while grazing. People are quick to assign certain attributes to grass and grain-finished lamb, but there are other factors that can affect flavor and alter carcass composition. Nor have research results been conclusive. Great variability exists, especially with grass-fed lamb. In other words, it is a complicated subject, and more research is needed before claims can be made that one kind of lamb is superior to another.

Due to their higher level of gain, grain-fed lambs are usually fatter. Finishing lambs on grain can also alter fat composition. Grain-fed lamb usually has higher levels of omega-6 fatty acids. At the same time, certain fats and oils can be added to the ration to alter the fatty acid profile.

Grain-fed lamb tends to have a milder, less "gamey" flavor. According to research, it has less off-odors and off-flavors compared to grass-fed lamb. Grain-fed lamb is usually more tender than grass-fed lamb. The higher marbling in grain-fed lambs is correlated to eating satisfaction. Traditionally, the American palate has preferred the taste of grain-fed meat.



Due to slower growth rates, grass-fed lambs tend to be leaner. Their meat usually contains more omega-3 fatty acids, resulting in a more desirable n-6/n-3 ratio. Grass-fed meat also contains more conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). Higher levels of vitamin E may increase shelf life of grass-fed meat (naturally) compared to grain-fed meat.

Grass-fed lamb usually has a more intense "gamier" flavor because it has less intramuscular fat, and the lambs tend to be older. It may not be as tender as grain-fed lamb. It is recommended that it not be cooked past medium, so it won't dry out. Grass-fed lamb is usually darker in color. Some people prefer the taste of grass-fed lamb.

Neither grain-fed nor grass-fed lamb is better. They are just different.

By Susan Schoenian, Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus, University of Maryland Extension. 2023.
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