

It's carnivore time

Terroir, minerality and notes of Cornish clover — meat tasting is all the rage. **Rachel Walker** puts 100% grass-fed beef to the test

It's very ripe," says someone. There's a murmur of agreement. "I'm picking up herbal notes." On hearing this, anyone might think they had walked into a wine tasting, but they would be wrong. It's not glasses of red that are being scrutinised, but platters of beef rump that are being passed up and down the tables.

It's a Friday night in Southwark, south London, and the Table Café's beef-tasting event, hosted by the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, is a sellout. Four farmers from different parts of the country have each sent a 100% grass-fed joint of beef and are serving them up alongside a supermarket sample that has been fed grain and grass. The aim is to ascertain whether the grazing pastures of the 100% grass-fed cows is reflected in their meat — whether we can taste Cornish clover or East Anglian rye grass — and whether beef has "terroir".

With increasing interest in provenance, it's no surprise this isn't the first event of its kind. Last year, the Abergavenny Food Festival hosted a "single estate lamb tasting", and lots of my fellow diners are talking about informal tastings

they've attended — some hosted by farmers exploring how different feed affects the meat, others by discerning meat-eaters exploring whether they can taste the difference.

The tasting at the Table Café coincides with the launch of a new London steakhouse, Hill & Szrok Public House, which serves only 100% grass-fed beef. A look at steakhouse menus up and down the country echoes the trend, with many of them listing specific information alongside the cuts: the breed, the length of time the meat has been hung and even the age of the animal, as well as the region it is from and the diet it was fed.

Perhaps the amount of detail is a backlash to the vagueness of supermarket labelling, where "grass fed" can relate to anything that has spent the majority of its life in pastures, meaning many spend their final months indoors, being fattened up on grain. This fuels the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association's work — the organisation has successfully rallied for labelling to flag up livestock that has spent its whole life eating grass (or hay and silage over winter), absorbing local flavour.

"The saying 'You are what you eat' applies to livestock, too," says Sara Gregson, director at the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association. "Britain has so many different pastures, which have a bearing on the flavour of the meat when the animals are outside 100% of the time, from clover-rich

Cornish pastures to somewhere like the Malham Tarn Estate, in Yorkshire, where the cattle graze at 1,000ft and are outside all year round."

The first platter arrives. The rump is from Deersbrook Farm, in Essex, and the cow in question was reared first on its mother's milk, then grazing land, hay and silage. The creamy fat is buttermilk yellow, rather than the usual bright white, and the meat has a tang of blue-cheese "farminess". "A comment we often get is, 'It's what beef used to taste like,'" says Anna

Blumfield, who is the latest generation in her family to run Deersbrook Farm, and who made the change to 100% grass-fed beef there. Indeed, the supermarket sample tastes bland in comparison, backing up the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association's claims that finishing cattle on grain masks the natural, grassy flavour.

As the evening progresses, I hear similar anecdotes. Ricky Jeffrey, from the award-winning Egg House Butchery, in Haddenham, Buckinghamshire,

admits he had never tried 100% grass-fed beef until a local farmer, Tom Morrison, flung a forequarter on the butcher's block. "He was so confident of the reaction it would get, he gave it to me for free," he says. Sure enough, Jeffrey's customers were converted, and now 80% of his beef is grass-fed only, to cater to the growing local demand.

Jeffrey is one of many in



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the room who have made the change and, as the evening progresses, the mood seems contagious. Tonight there's a growing evangelism surrounding the benefits of 100% grass-fed beef, but it's not something every expert agrees on. The next day,

I phone Richard Turner, executive chef at the renowned steakhouse chain Hawksmoor and the co-founder of Turner & George butchers and the Meatopia festival, to seek another opinion.

"I'm not a fan of 100% grass-fed beef," he says. "It has a sort of green, chlorophyll flavour. It's a bit funky." He isn't a fan of 100% grain-fed beef either.

"If I eat two or three mouthfuls of pure grain-fed beef, it makes me feel queasy." He explains that it's unusual to find 100% corn- or grain-fed beef in Britain, though — it's usually imported from America for US-style steakhouses.

Turner's preference lies with the more usual third middle ground, which is practised by the Ginger Pig, the beef supplier to Hawksmoor: grass to start, and then finishing the cattle for the last three to six weeks of their lives (season

dependent) on a varied diet of oats, barley, a little wheat, molasses and soya protein. "There's no doubt that feeding a cow just corn is bad for it," he says, "but helping to build up fat with varied cereals to finish them off won't do you any harm at all."

Turner's views jar with the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association's, but such debates often surround emerging connoisseurship. The past decade has seen consumers develop opinions on single-origin coffee and chocolate, while mineral water now has "terroir", and cider has "premier cru". Now beef is following suit.

Back at the beef tasting, it's hard to suppress a giggle at the sight of people thoughtfully

masticating, searching for the right word to describe each rump. James Swift, a pioneer in British charcuterie, of Trealy Farm in Monmouthshire, notices my doubtful expression. "Just remember, it wasn't long ago that supermarket wine sections were all Blue Nun and lambrusco," he says. "Back then, people would have thought you'd lost the plot if you started talking about grape varieties, let alone different vintages. Look how quickly that has changed."

Of course, he's right. Perhaps a future where we will be asking for sirloin from a five-year-old, 100% grass-fed longhorn grazed in species-rich flower meadows in Herefordshire isn't as far away as we imagine. ■

Tasting notes

100% grass-fed beef

Ripe, barnyard notes, with buttery fat and a lingering finish.

Supermarket beef, fed grass and grain

Robust, with iron-rich minerality. The fat is more about texture than taste, and there is a shorter finish.

100% grain-fed USDA beef

Sweet, with an unexpected richness and a less-robust taste and texture.



Giving 100%
Rachel Walker.
Inset At the
Table Café event