

Dear Customers

I am not commenting on the weather except to say it is fine for working.

I personally guarantee that spring will come.
But not this week.

The maple sap is running, faltering, freezing solid, and then trickling.
We are getting enough.

This letter is mostly about the taste of grass fed meat.

I wrote an article for the Bison Journal about taste.

In that article, I explained that we have few useful words to describe taste. Not just of meat but of anything.

Bitter, sweet, salty, sour and umami are the only defined words.

After that we are left to describe how a thing tastes by comparing it to something else.

Or worse yet, by saying what it does not taste like.

Such as, "It does not taste gamey."

A more commonly used descriptive phrase is, "It tastes like chicken."

Did you ever wonder why that gets so much use?

I like chicken, but chicken, unless it is prepared in a particularly tasty way does not have much taste.

Modern chicken, the chicken meat you buy in a store or through a fast food window comes from birds that are almost taste free.

The birds are confined and are fed a diet that is mainly corn.

Corn is the universal feed for modern confinement farming for many reasons. One of those reasons is because corn does not have much taste.

As vegetables go, corn is relatively tasteless. I like corn but a little butter and salt helps it a lot.

Animals, including poultry, beef, and hogs that live on corn are relatively tasteless.

You may enjoy the taste but it is mild, at best.

Umami is part of the taste of meat, seafood, mushrooms, some vegetables (e.g. ripe tomatoes), fermented, or cured foods like cheeses and soy sauce, green tea etc.

For many people, but not all, these are pleasant and enjoyable tastes.

Many tastes are acquired.

Some of us never acquire a positive response to specific tastes.

For example, I like mild cheeses a lot but cannot abide aromatic (stinky) cheeses.

Grass fed beef tastes like beef should taste.

Corn fed beef no doubt tastes good to many of you. To me the taste is weak and the "mouth feel" is slimy. I assume the slimy feel is from a higher fat content than I am accustomed to.

I realize those are acquired preferences.

Companies that mass market food do not want tasty meat.

The mass market prefers bland and consistent products.

It is best to start with meat low in taste and add spices to achieve sameness.

That is not necessarily bad.

There is value in consistency and predictability.

In many things, people do want the products they buy to be the same no matter where they buy them.

Animals that are medicated, given hormones, fed a high corn diet with nothing to do except eat will taste similarly.

Grass fed meat will taste like meat raised with choices.

A number of you wrote to tell me that it took effort to get used to the taste of grass fed meat.

You said your first year eating grass fed was difficult but you now prefer it.

I must admit I was not aware of that issue.

In the past two months, I have done a lot of research on the internet, talked to a number of other farmers and of course heard from many of you.

I now realize that I approach this issue from a much different perspective than some of you.

I mentioned in an earlier letter that I have never purchased cuts of meat from a store. Hot dogs and sometimes hamburger for a party but never a steak.

The rest of that story is that I have always known where my meat came from. In most cases that means I knew the animal.

Sometimes that was a tough old bull or cow, a fine young steer, a heifer that broke a leg and could still be used for meat, an aged sow, a deer, you get the picture.

So for me, meat always tastes like it should. The taste from animal to animal might vary terrifically but the taste was as expected.

Grass farmers and grass fed experts say that about 85% of people who try grass fed beef will like it and stick with it.

That means 15% will not.

It is further believed that the primary reason people do not stick with grass fed beef is that they dislike the taste.

A secondary reason is that they do not develop effective cooking techniques.

Obviously, we have been fortunate to have a higher retention ratio than 85%.

I suppose what I am learning is that not everyone will be satisfied or happy with our meat.

That may just be reality.

Nevertheless, we are committed to doing all we can to make the change to grass fed meat a success for you.

There are two principle origins of meat taste. Normal, good taste that is. (Certainly there are other causes, I am simplifying of course.)

1. Each species of animal has an intrinsic and unique taste. Nothing else really tastes like that species. A squirrel tastes like a squirrel. Pork tastes like pork. No doubt there are breed or population specific variations but those are just variations of the basic taste for that species.
2. Within a species the taste of a particular animal can vary over a wide range based on what the animal eats. Beef animals that eat grass taste different from animals raised on corn.

It is not as simple however, as corn or grass. Corn always tastes like corn. It is one species of plant.

“Grass” is often much more than just grass and different grass diets will taste different.

We work hard to have as many different plant species as possible in our pastures. Not just grasses of which we have at least fifty species, but forbs (flowering plants) of which we have hundreds of species, not to mention brushes and vines. The animals eat all of these plants in varying quantities and at different times. Some for minerals, some for medicinal effects some because they taste good or balance some other plant.

Every growing season is different.

Every animal has slightly different preferences.

Every year the blend of plants that do well in our pastures is different.

We give our animals many choices so they can determine how to best balance their diet.

Animals are much better at making dietary choices than we give them credit for.

My point about what animals eat is that each year our beef will taste different. Perhaps not a lot different or even noticeably different but different nevertheless.

Someday meats from naturally raised animals in different parts of the country may be identified by taste.

The edible plants that grow in different parts of the country vary.

Because of that, animals that graze in central Minnesota will taste different from animals that grow in Missouri or in that grow in South Dakota.

They will be different for some of the same reasons that cheeses or wines from different locales of France are different.

Some of those differences are from handling or processing but some are from the minerals in the soil, local organisms, and climate.

Let us hope that grass fed and sustainable farming continues to grow in popularity and survives into such a future.

That would be good for people, for animals and for the earth.

Best regards.

Tom

p.s. Sarah is posting this and many other Snake River Farm letters, recipes and messages on her blog www.sandhillfarmsarah.wordpress.com

You can also check out our facebook page. Snake River Farm Minnesota

Alex, one of our neighbor cowgirls just posted a photo of the barn roof on that facebook page. The big oak tree that I built into the barn died of oak wilt, so I extended the roof and hitching rail.

Finished it today.