

## Tallgrass Beef

Pasture-raised, lean beef from the Flint Hills

"This beef is delicious—just like we had off the farm when I was a kid." "Finally, I can eat beef again! Even my doctor will approve of this." "We have enjoyed it very much. Taste is excellent!" "I've been searching for a source of hormone-free beef. Now I've found it."

These are comments of satisfied buyers of Tallgrass Beef, a new natural beef product being offered by Tallgrass Prairie Producers Co-op, a recently-formed marketing cooperative of nine Kansas family ranchers.

Tired of low prices on the cattle market, and complaints by consumers that conventional beef isn't healthy these innovative ranchers decided to create a "quiet revolution" in the Kansas Flint Hills—marketing their own labeled product from beef raised in a unique way to satisfy consumer's concerns about beef.

Tallgrass Beef is "pasture-raised" from free range cattle that spend their entire lives on grass. Instead of being fattened on trucked-in grain and hay in a feedlot, they harvest their own food naturally by grazing over beautiful, clean rangelands, with some supplementation during low-forage periods. Also, to meet the needs of consumers with particular health concerns, none of the animals are given any hormone implants or antibiotics.

This production model results in truly lean beef—a dream-come-true for the many people who wish to reduce the amount of fat in their diet, but still love to eat beef. Many customers also comment on the fuller, richer flavor of this grassfed beef.

Is there really much difference between Tallgrass and conventional beef? Here are the lab results: according to the USDA Handbook No. 8-13, an average Choice Rib Steak contains 26.8% fat and a Select Rib Steak contains 23.7% fat. However, according to tests made at KSU's Analytical Services Lab, a typical Tallgrass Beef Rib Steak contains only 7.8% fat. (Most Tallgrass Beef cuts have even less fat than this: Top Sirloin 6.7%, Chuck Arm 5.4% and Top Round 4.4%.)

According to co-op President, Annie Wilson, "There will always be a market for grainfed, highly marbled beef. But," she continues, "there needs to be an alternative, too. We reject the USDA's grading system which says fat-is-better. This system is actually a relic of the grain surplus of the 1940's and has led many people to mistakenly believe that beef has to be fat to be tender. That's a myth."

To back up their claims, the ranchers cite results of a panel of 75 consumers at the KSU Sensory Lab which recently rated Tallgrass Beef the overall winner in a comparison to conventional Select Beef, with higher scores for tenderness, juiciness and texture.

Instead of relying on fat, Tallgrass beef producers state they achieve tenderness through careful attention to modern genetics, forage utilization, processing and aging techniques. "We personally track the production of each animal, and keep a database of all carcass information for quality control," explains rancher-member Gary Doornbos. The group has also been working with

the Kansas Value-Added Center and meat specialists at K-State in testing and developing their product.

Another essential factor in lean beef and tenderness is cooking method. "Most people overcook lean beef and then reject it as less tender," says Bonnie Aeschliman, a well-known beef cooking consultant from Contemporary Food Resources in Wichita. To help their customers avoid this problem, the ranchers hired Aeschliman to develop cooking instructions and recipes specifically for lean Tallgrass Beef.

Still in their first year of commercial production, the co-op's current problem is meeting a demand that has exceeded their estimates. However, they anticipate catching up their supply and then expanding into additional markets later this summer. Currently, they are selling beef to restaurants, small groceries and a small hospital; and are also offering a 25# variety box directly to consumers out of several lockers.

Tallgrass Beef is processed at Krehbiel's Specialty Meats, a small, federally-inspected plant in McPherson which specializes in private label products. The Krehbiels have a reputation for their clean plant and high quality, personal service and offer an alternative to the huge packing corporations which process thousands of animals a day.

Similarly, Wilson states, "The Tallgrass Prairie Producers Co-op want to offer an alternative—regional, family producers with a commitment to good care of their land, their animals and the health of the people who buy their beef."

In their vision statement, the ranchers also state they wish to create a closer connection between regional food producers and consumers. Since urbanization has left many people without any family ties to the land, the Tallgrass ranchers will invite customers to an annual Ranch Day to be held on one of their ranches. The first will be held later this fall.

Who are the members of Tallgrass Prairie Producers? According to the co-op bylaws, they must be "family ranchers" who live on or near their ranches and do the day-to-day work themselves (they can have employees or outside jobs as well—a necessity for some). Rancher members include Calvin and Shelly Carlson; Gary and Linda Doornbos; Jerry and Mary Dusenbury; Pete and Debbie Ferrel; Jim, Cathy and Josh Hoy; Carl and Emily Shewmaker; Bruce and Cheryl Spare; Arlan, Mary and David Stackley; and John and Annie Wilson. Associate Members Earl Wright, Monica Young and Caroline Mahon assist the co-op.

Tallgrass members have been actively organizing and researching this project for over two years, and last September formed a legal

marketing cooperative. "It has taken innumerable hours of meetings and fact-finding just to get this far," says Wilson. "We've had a steep learning curve, and have found that the beef business is very different from the cattle business." The group is not seeking additional members at this time, as they would like to make a real difference for the families who have already devoted so much energy to this project, before they expand further.

Tallgrass Beef is available in 25# variety boxes at Bummie's Grocery & Locker in Elmdale—a beautiful six mile drive west out of Cottonwood Falls, or one block east of Highway 50 at Elmdale (Hours 6:30 AM-5 PM, Monday-Saturday).

For more information on purchasing Tallgrass Beef, call 1-800-992-5967.



The Lower Fox Creek School is one of several stone buildings included in the tour of the Z Bar Ranch.

Photo by Roger Weaver



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