

got grass?

An Eastern Washington family farm puts its cows out to pasture and brings healthy beef to your table. | by Melody Moss



The mostly Angus herd is at home on the Williamson range.

Clouds of dust billow around the cattle as they rumble across the grass, snorting and frolicking toward us. As we leave the pasture, the calves line up behind the fence, as if to wish us good-bye.

It's a day in the life of the cows at Williamson Farms, in the Columbia River Plateau of Eastern Washington. The nearest town is George—best known for its proximity to the Gorge Amphitheatre. While it may not be paradise, the calves on this ranch are fortunate: They're part of a worldwide movement toward grass-fed livestock. The cattle in the crowded feedlots that dominate the American beef industry, on the other hand, are given antibiotics and growth hormones, and eat grain to accelerate their "finishing," or fattening up.

Cattle are ruminants designed to eat fibrous plants—not starchy grain—and process it while chewing their cud. After World War II, the explosive growth of factory farms and subsidized corn made family farms and pas-

tured livestock nearly obsolete. Concerns over nutrition, food safety, animal welfare, labor conditions, sustainability, and the economic vitality of family farms play roles in the recent surge of interest in grass-fed livestock.

"We're trying to replicate what used to be," says Williamson Farms co-owner Jerry Williamson. His family has run this farm for four generations, since the 1920s. The idea of feeding only grass to the cattle began with Jerry's grandfather, but little information was available then on how to pull this off on a marketable scale. The family stopped raising cattle and focused on their crops for 30 years. Jerry's interest in nutrition prompted him to take up the topic again, and four years ago the family began its grass-fed herd with mostly Angus cattle, along with a few Hereford and Wagyu cows.

Williamson Farms is now the largest single-family farm in the country producing 100 percent grass-fed beef on a year-round basis in open pasture. Two of Jerry's siblings, Marcia Streich and Alan, co-own the farm, Jerry's son Eric is the farm director, and Jerry's daughter DeAnne Clune does the marketing. Other relatives also help out; this is a family operation in the truest sense of the phrase.

Producing grass-fed beef year-round would be very difficult but for the Columbia River Plateau's favorable climate and good irrigation system. And the warm days and cool nights produce less woody grass. Williamson Farms uses rotational grazing and double cropping, growing alfalfa and triticale (a cross between rye and wheat grasses) for the cattle, as well as cash crops like peas and sweet corn. After the corn is

harvested, the cows graze on the stalks that remain. The cattle fertilize the soil, readying the pasture for planting winter grasses. "It all works in sync," says DeAnne.

These methods translate to a production quantity high enough for sales agreements with large outlets such as PCC Natural Markets and Bon Appétit, a food-service provider for corporate and university cafés. "The difference between [Williamson Farms beef] and what's in the grocery store is night and day," says Bon Appétit's Darin Leonardson.

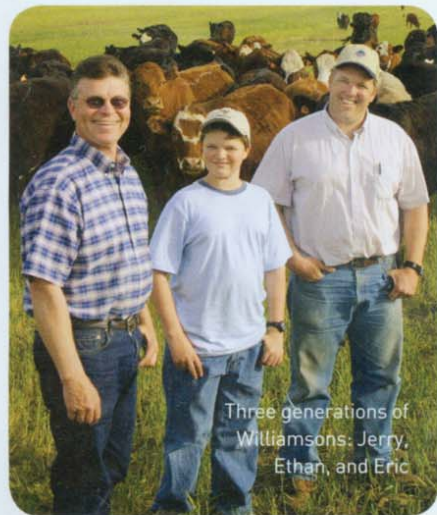
Customers pay for the difference, so make

Where's the beef?

Williamson Farms meat can be found at **PCC Natural Markets** (www.pccnaturalmarkets.com) in Fremont, Greenlake, Issaquah, Kirkland, and Redmond; at Andaluca and Oliver's Lounge, both located in the **Mayflower Park Hotel** downtown (www.mayflowerpark.com); and at the **Stumbling Goat Bistro** in Greenwood (www.stumblinggoatbistro.com), which features the farm's limited supply of Wagyu (kobe).

For the latest sources for Williamson Farms products, including farmers' markets, visit www.grassfednaturalbeef.com or call DeAnne Clune at 425-888-6448.

For general information about grass-fed beef, check out Jo Robinson's Web site, EatWild.com. Also recommended are the short animated films at The Meatrix.com and Michael Pollan's new best-seller, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.



Three generations of Williamsons: Jerry, Ethan, and Eric

dish



grilled new york strip steak in mint marinade



Recipe courtesy chef Seth Caswell, Stumbling Goat Bistro

MARINADE

- 4 10-ounce grass-fed New York strip steaks (may substitute top sirloin or tri-tip)
- 1/4 cup fresh mint, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 chili pepper, minced, as hot as you can stand (cayenne, habanero, Thai)
- 2 tablespoons honey, locally harvested
- 1/2 cup red wine vinegar or sherry vinegar
- 1/2 cup olive oil

GRILLED ONIONS

- 8 Walla Walla spring onions (aka salad onions) with greens attached
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

SALAD

- 2 Japanese or Persian cucumbers*, diced in half-inch cubes
- 12 red radishes, quartered
- 2 tablespoons fresh mint, chopped
- 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 bunch pea vines, roughly chopped (optional)

MAKES
4
SERVINGS

PREP TIME
45
MINUTES

DIRECTIONS

In a shallow bowl, combine all marinade ingredients. Marinate steaks in refrigerator, covered, overnight, or for an hour at room temperature. Stir the ingredients a few times during the marinating process.

Preheat grill for 15 minutes to prevent beef from sticking. If using a charcoal grill, let the coals smolder for at least 30 minutes before grilling. While grill is preheating, toss all salad ingredients together in a large bowl, reserving the pea vines until just before serving. Keep the salad cold.

Slice the onions in half lengthwise. Brush the cut sides with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Place the onions, cut side down, onto hot grill. After 1 minute, turn the onions 90 degrees to create grill marks. After another minute, flip them over and grill 1 additional minute. Remove and set aside.

Remove beef from marinade and place directly onto hot grill at a 45 degree angle to the grill bars. After 2 minutes, turn the steaks 90 degrees to create crosshatch grill marks. Flip the steaks after 2 more minutes (use tongs or a spatula, not a fork). A 1-inch thick steak will be medium rare at this point. A thicker steak (1 1/2 to 2 inches) will need an additional 2 to 4 minutes for medium rare. Let the steaks rest on a platter for 5 minutes before slicing. To serve, place one portion of steak on a large plate, or all of the steaks on a large platter. Lean 4 or 5 pieces of the grilled onion in an X pattern on one corner of the steak. Spoon the chilled salad on the side and drizzle with additional olive oil if desired.

*These cucumbers are small, thin-skinned, and nearly seedless. Run-of-the-mill cucumbers can be substituted if peeled and seeded, and you'd probably only need one instead of two.

sure you know what you're getting. Grass-fed beef costs more than conventional market beef, but oftentimes it is less expensive than grain-fed organic beef. Look for "100 percent grass-fed" on the label. Grain-fed beef producers may tout phrases like "range-raised" or "pastured," which have no standardized meaning. Under current USDA standards for beef, "natural" indicates no artificial ingredients and minimal processing—but by this definition most fresh beef is natural. "Organic" beef comes from cattle that have eaten only certified organic grass or grain. Even "grass-fed" is ambiguous unless "100 percent" precedes it—most cattle consume grass at some point in their lives. Williamson Farms beef is natural, free of antibiotics and added hormones, and 100 percent grass-fed—but like most grass-fed beef it does not have organic certification. Until the USDA establishes specific guidelines for grass-fed terminology, it's best to know your producer.

When you factor in its leanness, grass-fed beef is one of the healthiest meats on the market—even better than chicken breasts. Vashon journalist Jo Robinson, author of *Pasture Perfect*, reports that grass-fed beef contains the same "good fats" as wild game: omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which have shown promise in preventing cancer and heart disease.

So how does this grassy stuff taste? For most beef-lovers, including me, pretty darn good. The beneficiaries of my Williamson Farms cooking experiments described the beef as having a bright, clean, subtle yet beefy flavor—without the greasy dribbles down the chin. And it cooks up tender so long as you remember that it cooks as much as 30 percent faster than conventional beef. Use a meat thermometer and keep a close watch.

Regardless of cooking method, be sure to let the meat rest after removing it from heat, five minutes for steaks and 10 to 15 minutes for roasts. Crock-Pots are ideal for preparing roasts, which should be cooked slowly at a low temperature. For medium-rare beef of any cut, remove when the internal temperature reaches approximately 125 degrees; it will rise another 5 to 10 degrees after resting. Thaw frozen beef slowly in the fridge or submerge it in cool or lukewarm water; do not microwave. Because of its low fat content, there is little shrinkage: A pound of raw ground beef will yield just a little less than a pound of grilled burgers.

In addition to seeking new retail outlets for its beef, Williamson Farms is considering raising poultry, opening a farm store, marketing ready-to-eat items like beef jerky and hot dogs, and possibly seeking organic certification. The real future of the farm, though, lies with the fifth generation: Eric's oldest son, Ethan, age 11, uses the money he earns helping out on the farm to purchase toy tractors, his current passion. That's a promising indicator for a future farmer.

As we pass by more cattle on the farm, we notice some of them taking an afternoon siesta. "That's a good sign if they're lying down," says Eric. "They're full; they're chewing their cud; they're happy." 🌻