



Beyond Organic

By Jo Robinson

Organic meat, poultry, and dairy products are now available at your supermarket, which is a change for the better. When you see the organic label, you know the food is going to be free of pesticide residues, synthetic hormones, genetically modified organisms, and a long list of questionable additives. You also have the satisfaction of knowing that raising animals organically causes less harm to the environment. But when it comes to animal production, organic is not enough. We need to be raising animals on their species-appropriate diets.

Few consumers realize that many producers of "organic" or "naturally raised" animal products raise their animals in confinement and feed them grain—just like the operators of conventional feedlots. Feeding large amounts of grain to a grazing animal decreases the nutritional value of its products whether the grain is organic or conventionally raised. The reason is simple. Compared with grass, grain has far fewer omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin E.¹ Therefore, grainfed animals have fewer of these important nutrients in their meat and dairy products. Grainfeeding also interferes with the creation of a cancer-fighting fight called conjugated linoleic acid or CLA.² A test by an independent lab determined that milk from one of the largest organic grain-fed dairies had no more omega-3 fatty acids or CLA than milk from ordinary dairies. Similarly, meat from organic grain-fed beef has the same nutritional profile as meat from the largest Kansas feedlot.

The same story holds true for organic but confinement-raised poultry. Their meat and eggs have no more omega-3s or vitamin E than the products you find in the supermarket.³ (Unless the birds are given special supplements along with the grain.)

For many consumers, food safety is an even bigger concern than nutrition. Once again, grass feeding offers an important advantage. It has been known for decades that grain feeding makes a cow's digestive tract more acid. Now we know that this acidic environment speeds the growth of potentially dangerous E. coli bacteria and, even worse, makes the bugs more acid-resistant. Alarmingly, these acid-resistant bacteria are much more likely to survive the cleansing acidity of our own digestive juices and make us ill.⁴

Depriving our livestock of fresh greens and vastly increasing their consumption of grain has jeopardized our health in ways people never imagined. Although feeding organically raised grain reduces our reliance on pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, it does not provide the food that nature intended us to eat.

¹ Garton, G. A.. "Fatty Acid Composition of the Lipids of Pasture Grasses." *Nature* 187(4736): 511-12.

² Dhiman, T. R., G. R. Anand, *et al.* (1999). "Conjugated linoleic acid content of milk from cows fed different diets." *J Dairy Sci* 82(10): 2146-56.

³ Lopez-Bote, C. J., R.Sanz Arias, A.I. Rey, A. Castano, B. Isabel, J. Thos (1998). "Effect of free-range feeding on n-3 fatty acid and alpha-tocopherol (vitamin E) content and oxidative stability of eggs." *Animal Feed Science and Technology* 72: 33-40.

⁴ Diez-Gonzalez, F., T. R. Callaway, *et al.* (1998). "Grain feeding and the dissemination of acid-resistant *Escherichia coli* from cattle." *Science* 281(5383): 1666-8.