

Sustainable ranching renaissance takes hold in Northern California

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TOMALES -- The herd began pressing toward the gate the moment Stemple Creek Ranch owner Loren Poncia hopped the barbed-wire fence. All 300 snorted, snarled, grunted and mooed, pushing their flesh closer and closer to the metal barrier. Poncia, with an iPhone to his ear and cowboy boots on his feet, unwound a chain and flung open the gate.

Through it they stormed, away from the chopped-down remnants of their last few meals and toward a verdant, dew-glistening field of rye and clover.

Then, only the sounds of munching.

These dark-brown Angus cattle are lusted over in Bay Area culinary circles, and the grass-fed behemoths are not the only ones. What began as a locavore movement that emphasized local, organic produce has grown to include the proteins on the dinner plate as well.

"It's quite the renaissance right now in the Bay Area from a meat producer's standpoint," says Mark Pasternak, who owns Marin County's renowned Devil's Gulch Ranch with his wife, Myriam Kaplan-Pasternak, in tiny Nicasio. "We're sold out every week."

Ranchers at places like Stemple Creek, Devil's Gulch and Morris Grassfed Beef strive to raise cattle, pigs, sheep, rabbits, chickens and other delectable beasts in ways that show respect for the land, the animal and, in turn, the consumer.

Many high-end Bay Area restaurants and grocers now insist on sourcing their meat from these ranches, and their gourmet popularity is fueling a resurgence in neighborhood meat markets, such as Berkeley's Local Butcher Shop and Santa Cruz's el Salchichero, that only purchase whole carcasses.

El Salchichero owner Chris LaVeque gets his pork and rabbit from Devil's Gulch and his beef about a mile from his shop at N-A Ranch, where, he says, "the cows have a better view than a \$15 million house on (Santa Cruz's) West Cliff."

"You just look for someone who cares, who doesn't use any gnarly chemicals," he says. "The flavor and quality of the animals reflects how well they have been raised and how well they've been cared for."

The conditions at these ranches serve as a stark contrast to the origins of most store-bought meat.

"In the U.S., 98 percent of beef is produced in feedlots, mostly on grain, mostly in the Midwest," says Ben Provan, who helps run Potter Valley's Magruder Ranch, along the Russian River. "It's different here. We're doing rotational grazing and holistic ranch management."

Provan, his wife, Grace Magruder Provan, and her father, Mac Magruder -- whose business cards say "head honcho" -- focus on grass-fed cattle and acorn-finished pigs on a 2,400-acre property that has been in the Magruder family since 1919. Raising "acorn-finished" pigs is a centuries-old Mediterranean tradition that allows the animals to roam free over 500 acres of pasture and woods at Potter Valley, grazing and foraging. It's the pork equivalent of free-range chickens.

The Magruder family further minimizes its ecological footprint by selling only to Northern California customers, including Oakland's Oliveto and San Francisco's Flour+Water, where the acorn-finished pork is prized.

"Acorns change the flavor of the meat in just a few months," Provan says. "It takes longer, but it's a much more developed flavor."

Bautista know that the 800 families who buy their beef don't need to understand the science behind what goes into the land. But they know deliciousness is in the details.

"In the process of raising our grass-fed beef, we're using the animals to create rangeland that sequesters carbon, holds more water, and generates biodiversity," Joe Morris says. "That's the essence of sustainability. We can't do it any other way."

On the Poncia family's ranch, the cattle live in the pastures where they're born. They eat the grass, breathe in the salt-tinged air and sleep amid the fog that rolls in from nearby Tomales Bay. After 18 months to two years, they're driven to a "harvesting facility" -- the preferred term for a slaughterhouse -- in Petaluma, about 15 miles away. Then, they're shipped to Bay Area retailers such as The Local Butcher Shop and a handful of Whole Foods Market stores. Next stop: consumers' homes.

The distance from pasture to plate is only a few dozen miles, and that's how Poncia likes it. Despite demand outstripping supply, the family has no plans to expand its customer base past Northern California.

"We're just happy to have an amazing location 60 miles from downtown San Francisco and thousands of customers who value the meat," Poncia says.

At Devil's Gulch Ranch, Pasternak and Kaplan-Pasternak, a veterinarian, focus on humane and sustainable ranching as they produce 200 to 400 "meat rabbits" a week from about 1,000 mother rabbits. Among their fans: chefs and diners at some of the Bay Area's top destination restaurants, including Chez Panisse, French Laundry and Michael Mina.

But it's not just restaurants that are sourcing their pork, beef and other meat from sustainable farms in the region. Consumers are purchasing partial carcasses, called halves or quarters. "Meat boxes" -- a carnivorous cousin to the farm produce boxes that have become so popular -- are also becoming a foodie phenomenon.

Prices vary, certainly, but carnivores who buy in bulk from a rancher and do their own cutting save money.

"If you're willing to do a little bit more work, you can eat sustainably affordably," says Magruder's Provan. "You are what you eat, and that goes for us, too."

Follow Tim O'Rourke at [Twitter.com/timothyorourke](https://twitter.com/timothyorourke).

The Price of Meat

It's no secret that organic produce and artisanal foodstuffs cost more, and so does sustainably, humanely raised meat. Prices vary depending on where you shop, but here's a snapshot, using prices for sustainable, grass-fed and free-range meat from Berkeley's Local Butcher Shop and feedlot meat prices from a traditional supermarket:

Rib eye (beef), per pound: \$22 versus \$12.49.

Spare ribs (pork), per pound: \$12 versus \$5.49.

Shoulder chop (lamb), per pound: \$13 versus \$7.99.