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Certified Piedmontese vs. Other Breeds

For traditional beef enthusiasts, Certified Piedmontese® beef is a bit of a head-scratcher. You can't judge it by traditional USDA standards because its lack of marbling implies (incorrectly) that it isn't prime or choice grade; yet the meat is so tender that you can cut through a medium-rare Certified Piedmontese New York strip with a regular table knife.

Moreover, you don't need to choose specific cuts of meat to obtain either its leanness or tenderness. Sure, a Certified Piedmontese chuck roast may be tougher than a Certified Piedmontese filet mignon, but that chuck roast is going to make the average top sirloin seem like jerky in comparison. All cuts of Certified Piedmontese are much leaner than similar cuts of beef from conventional breeds, but studies have shown that those Certified Piedmontese cuts are just as tender as beef from other, fattier breeds.

In other words, Certified Piedmontese beef goes against commonly held notions of what makes beef taste good and what makes beef a healthy nutritional option for health-conscious consumers. Indeed, another name for Certified Piedmontese beef easily could be "the other red meat."

A New Beef Renaissance

Now raised in North America, Certified Piedmontese cattle are direct descendants of an ancient breed of cattle that originated in the foothills of the Italian Alps, and genetics plays a key role in providing Certified Piedmontese with certain advantages.

Certified Piedmontese cattle have an inactive myostatin gene, the gene that normally limits the number and sizes of muscle fibers an animal will have. Because the gene normally regulates skeletal muscle mass, and because it's dormant in Certified Piedmontese cattle, they develop what is known as "double-muscling," which causes them to develop additional muscle. This is particularly noticeable in the hindquarters of the animal, where much so-called "prime" beef resides.

"Certified Piedmontese cattle gain about 14% more muscle than traditional cattle of any other breed," says Shane Peed, manager of Lone Creek Cattle Company (www.lonecreekcattleco.com). That extra muscle makes a visible difference in the cattle's appearance, so much so that even someone new to cattle and cattle breeding can see the more pronounced musculature.

Better Than Grass-Fed

Other than the fact that its body fat ratios resemble that of an Olympic athlete, Certified Piedmontese beef otherwise has little in common, in terms of taste, with other commonly known low-fat cattle, such as bison, or cattle that have been grass-fed their entire lives.

According to Don Straight, manager of Great Plains Beef, Certified Piedmontese cattle spend most of their lives in pasture and then are finished on grain in a feedlot environment. "We control the rations and population of cattle per feedlot, and we don't inject them with antibiotics or hormones," Straight says.

But the grain finishing does help to produce beef more in keeping with the taste of traditional American prime beef. "Grass-finished cattle produces a different kind of beef, and some consumers do like that, but the taste, the tenderness aspect is different," says Straight. "For a person who is used to eating traditional beef that is prime, grass-fed isn't going to be an alternative to that because they are so night-and-day different from a taste and texture standpoint."

As far as Straight is concerned, Certified Piedmontese beef has a more bountiful and beefier taste than its low-fat alternatives. "It has all the nutritional advantages of traditional grass-fed beef—and even more, in some cases—but it'll taste the way most Americans expect beef to taste," he says.

Delicious, Lean, and Consistent

According to Registered Dietitian Sally Hillis, Certified Piedmontese beef's leanness and unique flavor is much like

the taste of tenderloin, flank steaks, or petit tender cuts in traditional beef. "The tenderness may vary in the different cuts, but overall, the cuts are exceptional and appealing to the chef and consumer," she says. The amount of fat in various cuts of Certified Piedmontese is fairly consistent—which is to say minimal.

Pay For Tenderness, Not Fat

Although Certified Piedmontese is universally known as premium beef, the premium paid is on the meat rather than the fat. "The tenderness is comparable to a Kobe, Wagyu, or prime beef, but the latter choices rely on intramuscular fat for tenderness," Straight says.

Shane Peed says that the biggest differentiator for Certified Piedmontese beef is its unique combination of leanness and tenderness. "You're not paying more for fat," Peed notes. In contrast, most premium steaks can contain as much as 20% to 30% fat—and when you pay by the pound for a cut of that beef, you're paying for that fat.

Because of the inactive myostatin gene, Certified Piedmontese beef has shorter muscle fibers and less connective tissue than its stringy, grass-fed counterparts—that in itself makes for a more tender cut of beef. In addition, the unique genetics of the breed prevent Certified Piedmontese cattle from generating much in the way of surface or intramuscular fat.

A More Nutritional Beef Option

Certainly, Certified Piedmontese beef's relative lack of fat makes it a better nutritional option than traditional

premium beef, but what about potential health benefits? Is Certified Piedmontese a healthier beef option for consumers?

Experts say yes. Certified Piedmontese beef is a nutrient-dense food. The cattle's genetics and diet combine to create a meat that is low in both saturated fats and cholesterol, and one that also offers high levels of both omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

"Because it's such a lean product," says Straight, "your protein intake is much higher than with traditional beef." It's also important to note that you don't have to limit yourself to historically tender cuts like the eye of round or tenderloin to get tender beef, because even the traditionally tender cuts are extremely lean, and the leanest Certified Piedmontese cuts are still tender.

"Certified Piedmontese is a fantastic protein choice," notes Hillis.

That's backed up by a recent University of Nebraska study that compared Piedmontese beef to Angus. In identically raised and processed sample cattle, the Angus showed the most fatty marbling; the Piedmontese, even though it was much leaner, was just as tender, said the study.

That leanness translates to good nutrition. While an average USDA choice strip loin has 58mg of cholesterol per 100g, a 100g sample of Certified Piedmontese strip loin has only 44mg, according to the UNL study. And while a USDA choice strip loin contains about 6.4g of saturated fat per 100g, the study found that the same cut from cattle such as Certified Piedmontese contains only about 4.8g of saturated fat per 100g—even though the Piedmontese beef is just as tender as the fattier beef.

Other reports concur with the UNL findings, including a USDA-sponsored study described in the 2001 *Journal of Animal Science* that concluded that the inactive myostatin gene “. . . reduced fat content [and] increased lean growth efficiency,” and noted that while the inactive gene reduces fatty marbling, “there is no decrease in meat tenderness.”

The Taste of Certified Piedmontese

Straight says that Certified Piedmontese beef exhibits an amazing acceptance of seasonings, herbs, and other flavors. “You don’t have to compete with a heavy, gamey flavor or high level of fat, so you can do a lot of different things with it,” he says.

Experts describe the taste and finish of Certified Piedmontese beef as delicate, subtle, and understated. Hillis recommends enhancing the flavor of Certified Piedmontese beef with good quality olive oil, fresh herbs, shiitake mushrooms, sea salt, or lemon juice, pointing out that the taste marries well with simple, authentic flavors such as those.

Cooking With Certified Piedmontese Beef

Certified Piedmontese beef cooks faster than conventional beef, needing perhaps one-quarter to one-third less cooking time than traditional beef. That can require that the cook keep a closer eye on the beef once it’s placed on the grill or in the oven.

Hillis recommends cooking small cuts at high direct heat on a preheated surface, while larger pieces of meat do well seared over high heat and then cooked more slowly over indirect heat. As always, be sure to bring your Certified Piedmontese beef to room temperature, cook it to an internal temperature of 120°F, then remove from heat, cover with foil, and let it rest.

