

Know your producer, you'll know your meat

Additives may be legal, but there is reason to avoid them

FOOD. It is a loaded word whichever way you look at it. Some of us eat too much of it, others way too little. Tons of it is produced; tons of it is wasted.

Some of it is good for us, but lots of it is not — and some of it is not even food.

If global nutrition experts are to be believed, about 80% of foods on supermarket shelves today did not exist 100 years ago. And they claim that the more additives manufacturers add to our food to extend its life, the more it shortens our own.

South Africa's there's-a-donkey-in-my-wors furore, coupled with the horse-meat scandal in the UK, focused consumer attention on what is — and should be — in our meat for the first time in years.

Nearly 60% of 139 meat products tested by the University of Stellenbosch included the DNA of animal species not listed on the labels. Most of the incorrect labelling involved pork, chicken, beef and sheep, but at least five samples contained goat, four had water buffalo and one had donkey. Cross-contamination issues at processing plants, the poor traceability of meat sold and sloppy labelling were blamed.

Far more troubling for me, however, are the non-animal additives added to most meat sold in South Africa every day. They are also not labelled — and they do not have to be. I am talking about routine antibiotics used in the chicken, beef, lamb and pork industries to keep factory-farmed livestock alive and free of disease, as well as the added growth hormones and stimulants used to fatten them up for slaughter.

The Power Report



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 ● Other than in exceptional circumstances, readers sending me complaints must be willing to be identified and photographed

This is how conventional farming — which includes confined grain feedlots housing up to 100 000 head of cattle during the growth “finishing” period — has operated in South Africa and elsewhere for decades.

If I had to choose between unwittingly eating a bit of donkey meat or absorbing recycled pharmaceuticals and synthetic hormones pumped into mass-produced meat, I know which lesser of the two evils I could more easily swallow.

So what choices do consumers have when they want to eat more ethically and healthily? Quite a few, if they do their homework.

Eating organic and free-range food that has no antibiotics or growth hormones added to it will cost anything between 5% and 30% more. But, if you can afford it, the potential benefits outweigh the added cost.

And it does not have to be a



FINEST CUT: Michael Ker-Fox of Hope Meat Supplies

Picture: JACKIE CLAUSEN

case of all or nothing. The most prolific use of routine antibiotics and growth promoters is arguably in the poultry trade — a free-range chicken growing naturally can take up to 120 days to be ready for slaughter, compared with just 39 days for chickens pumped with routine antibiotics and growth stimulants.

There is no conclusive evidence that eating the residue of routine antibiotics, growth promoters or added hormones affects your health. Such additives are legally permitted.

But some scientists claim that hormone residues in meat can disrupt humans' hormone balance, cause developmental problems, interfere with the reproductive system and even lead to cancer. Children and pregnant women are the most susceptible to these negative health effects. There is consensus among scientists that antibiotic use in farm animals increases antibiotic resistance, which can be transmitted back to humans through food or the environment.

The potential risks of hormone growth promoters in animals have led to them being banned in the European Union. The synthetic hormone rBST, used to stimulate milk production in cows, is banned in the EU, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

The demand for “clean” meat,

as some call it, is growing. Caroline McCann, owner of award-winning Braeside Meat Market in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, said she had seen a 300% increase in customers in the past 18 months. McCann has supplied free-range, grass-fed meat for the past seven years.

She is now in the process of registering a trademark and protocol with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which will give her official certification — and credibility.

Not that she needs it. The

“If you can afford ‘clean’ food, the potential benefits outweigh the added cost

queue at her store on Saturday mornings runs out the door. But McCann wants her piece of paper proving that her meat, which is about 5% to 10% more pricey than conventional meat, is free-range and grass-fed.

Although her beef and lamb, fed on indigenous grass, is technically organic, it is hugely costly to prove this against strict international organic criteria.

The demand from consumers

prompted Michael Ker-Fox and his wife, Vikki, to open their first butchery in Durban North five months ago.

Hope Meat Supplies, which had previously done online sales only, sources free-range beef and lamb from the family's Underberg and Richmond farms, offering hormone- and antibiotic-free produce.

The registration for his free-range trademark is under way.

Ker-Fox said growth accelerators cheated consumers by causing water retention, with the consumer losing out on shrinkage when the liquid in the muscle drains out during cooking. “Consumers have been blinded over the years by food producers who don't want questions asked about stimulants and antibiotics added to meat, because these additives boost weight and ensure they get a better price,” he said.

Ker-Fox does not shy away from the added expense for consumers. His meat costs up to 15% more than mass-produced meat. His chicken, sourced from a trusted free-range farmer in the Midlands, is close to twice the price.

Greenfields Free Range Beef, sourced from a farm in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, registered its trademark a year ago. Its beef is grass-fed on pasture with less than 5% maize supplementation. It is also free of

added hormones, stimulants and antibiotics.

Greenfields's trademark is so valued that some supermarkets and a top Durban restaurant have been caught fraudulently using the farm's labels on their meat and menu.

Greenfields's beef takes up to 320 days to “finish” (get to slaughter weight) compared with 110 days for feedlot beef. It is not surprising that consumers have to fork out almost twice as much for its meat.

“People out there are making outrageous claims about their meat,” said farm manager Mark Muncer. “I see producers claiming to be free-range when, in fact, their beef is put into commercial feedlots for the last 90 days of their lives.”

There are many other small producers in South Africa determined to farm the right way for the right reasons. They deserve support.

So do those retailers, including Woolworths, Pick n Pay and Shoprite Checkers, that carry limited ranges of free-range and stimulant- and antibiotic-free produce.

The more consumers demand clean meat, the more such meat we will see on offer.

Finding a trustworthy producer, retailer or farm that practises what it preaches — and is transparent about all its processes — is the best way to go.

What's in a name?

TERMS like “organic”, “free-range” and “grass-fed” are vague at best and unverified at worst, making it hard for consumers to know what is really on their plates.

Local draft regulations on “organic” were drawn up a few years ago, but they were never finalised. A voluntary benchmark is now being worked on that is modelled on European Union certification standards.

As for the rest, it is a bit of a free for all. Bear in mind that the Consumer Protection Act, coupled with new labelling laws, do protect consumers from misleading claims.

Free-range eggs and poultry are given a passing nod in Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries regulations, but they refer only to free roaming and make no mention of additives.

But regulations allow for a “trademark”, which can be used to specify a product that is different to the conventional one. This trademark and protocol can be applied for by a producer and registered with the department through the South African Meat Industry Company, which then audits the process.

Still confused? The following guide to jargon may help:

Organic: No pesticides, man-made fertilisers, irradiation, genetic modification or sewage waste. Animals are fed a natural diet. In most countries, rigorous certification procedures are in place before a product can be labelled “organic”. In South Africa, in the absence of legislation, reputable organic producers can be certified according to European or US specifications.

Free-range: Free to roam with access to the outdoors.
Feedlot: Confined enclosures in which young animals are fattened on a grain diet for a specific period, usually 60 to 90 days, before slaughter. Growth

hormones, stimulants and antibiotics are routine.
Added growth hormone, stimulant-free: No legally permitted growth hormones, stimulants or enhancers used.
Antibiotic-free: No routine antibiotics given.
rBST-free: Free of artificial hormone used to increase milk production in dairy cows.
GMO-free: Does not contain genetically modified organisms — organisms or products produced through techniques in which the genetic material has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally. Most maize and soya grown in South Africa is genetically modified.
Grass-fed beef: Free-range beef raised on pastures for full life cycle and fed on grass. Although ideally there should be no supplementation, some grass-fed cattle can be given up to 5% maize feed. Grass-fed beef boasts less saturated fat and more nutrients.
SA grainfed beef: Registered trademark of the South African Feedlot Association. It distinguishes grain-fed, feedlot beef from grass-fed, free-range beef.
Certified natural lamb: Registered trademark of Shoprite Checkers. Specifies free-range meat with no animal products or by-products in the feed and no hormones and stimulants. Strict antibiotic control is a requirement, as is traceability from fork to farm.
Country reared free-range: Pick n Pay's registered trademark for its free-range, hormone-, stimulant- and antibiotic-free meat.
Boerewors: Legislated to contain 90% meat, including a maximum of 30% fat, and no offal. Can contain 10% water, spices and rusk.
Braaiwors/wors: Not legislated so it can have more fat and less meat as well as other additives.



AT buying site OneDayOnly (again) for not only refunding Sara Khan — and many others — when it supplied the wrong remote-controlled helicopter, but for allowing customers to keep the one already delivered and valued at R344.



AT City of Johannesburg and City Power for having a web-based fault system that does not work. When Robbie Lehman mailed “Support” as prompted, he got a reply saying a “new support contract” was not yet in place. “What sort of third world-class, banana republic do we live in?” said Lehman.