



Buying Local Meat

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Buying locally raised and processed meat supports local farmers and ranchers, connects you to where and how the meat was raised, and can reduce your food costs. Often, the most economical method is to purchase a live animal (or a portion of one) and have it butchered at a local custom-exempt processing plant to your specifications.

Meat Processing Regulations

Buying local meat can be confusing since state and federal regulations vary based on the type of meat and the type of processor. Meat that is slaughtered and processed under federal inspection can be shipped and sold anywhere in the USA and is eligible for export. Meat that is slaughtered and processed under state inspection can be sold for wholesale or retail within the state of Wyoming – including to schools, restaurants, and grocery stores..

Animals that are slaughtered under custom-exempt inspection must only go back to the owner of that animal and cannot be sold after slaughter – each package is marked "NOT FOR SALE". Custom processing is typically how halves and quarters are processed since the transfer in ownership happens before processing.

Home-processed domestic rabbit meat, poultry produced under a USDA 1,000 bird small producer exemption (which are raised and processed on the producer's operation), and farm raised fish (except catfish) can be sold directly to the end consumer.

Purchasing Local Meat

Many local butchers have a retail store front where customers can purchase locally grown and processed meat by the cut. Many farmers and ranchers also sell meat by the cut at farmers markets, online, on-farm stands, CSAs, or local retail stores. Meat sold in this manner must come from animals that were slaughtered under state or federal inspection, meaning that an inspector looks at the carcass at slaughter and determines if the health of the animal is acceptable.

Purchasing Animals for Custom Slaughter

Ranchers and farmers often sell "locker meat" – which means buying a whole, half, or quarter animal all at once. The animal is then usually slaughtered and processed at a custom-exempt facility – a facility that is exempt from slaughtering animals while an inspector is present.

The producer will usually drop the animal off at the processing facility on your behalf, then you pick it up (usually frozen) when it is ready and pay for the processing. You pay the producer for the animal and the butcher for the processing. The butcher will cut your animal any way you prefer, including further processing such as for sausage or smoking. It is not legal to re-sell meat from custom-exempt processors or use it to feed the public, like in schools or restaurants.

Wyoming's custom-exempt plants are licensed by the Wyoming State Department of Agriculture (by the Consumer Health Services division). Custom processors handle meat in a safe, clean and ethical way and process it in a clean and inspected facility. Each facility is inspected for sanitation but there is not an inspector on-site during slaughter.



The advantage of this approach is a lower cost per pound to buy than to buy the same meat by the cut at the retail level. The challenges are that

- the cost is all up front,
- you have to have freezer space to store the meat, and
- you will get all of the meat from the animal, including cuts you may not prefer.

Marketing Claims

The meat industry often uses terms that are confusing to consumers. Claims like “pastured”, “natural”, “grass fed” and “grain fed” are not evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration or the Federal Trade Commission. The certification “organic”, however, is closely regulated by the USDA since there is a specific legal definition. Other entities offer their own certifications regarding such things as animal characteristics, how animals were raised, and how animals were treated, such as angus or kosher.

Finding a Rancher

You can contact a farmer directly and buy whole/half animals “live”. Note that supply may be variable. Keep in mind that a rancher is likely to sell the whole animal before slaughter (and it may take time to accumulate enough owners to sell the whole animal), and that it will take time for animals to reach market weight. Beef animals usually take between 18 and 24 months to reach a finished weight. Hogs are ready in five to 10 months. Lambs can be ready in four months to a year depending on the style of management.

Many farm animals are born in the spring and are ready in the fall and early winter. Thus buying local meat often takes some planning. Contact a farmer or rancher and let them know what you are looking for so they can reserve an animal for you. They can often be found via farmer’s markets, food co-ops, county Extension offices, online, and by word of mouth.

Buying from the producer is a good way to acquaint yourself with local agriculture. Most locally raised animals are not bought and sold at auctions, are raised with their mothers, and have access to the outside. Most have access to pasture at the right time of year and are not given hormones or medicines unless it is because the animal needs them. Most ranchers that sell meat also eat it themselves.

How Much Meat

An animal’s live weight refers to the weight when a live animal is on the scale. The dressed weight – also known as the hanging weight or the carcass weight – is the weight after removing the parts that aren’t edible, like the hide, feet, head, some of the bones and most of the innards. The dressing percentage for most beef cattle is about 61%. So a 1,200 pound animal would dress about 732 lbs.

A good resource is *How Much Meat to Expect from Your Animal* which is available as a free download from Kansas State University at <https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/Item.aspx?catId=388&pubId=20969>.

Animal Shares

Wyoming expanded the state’s Food Freedom Act in 2020 to include specific language allowing ranch-to-consumer meat through herd shares. The law meets an exemption of the Federal Meat Inspection Act that allows custom slaughtering of livestock for the owner of an animal. Thus shareholders are not technically paying for meat but for the care of the animal and delivery of the meat. The number of shares sold is not limited and because shareholders become owners before slaughter, the exemption is met and shareholders are able order as much or as little meat as they wish rather than purchasing a whole, half or quarter. A written contract and a bill of sale are required. The amendment becomes effective on July 1, 2020.