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February 13, 2010

## Heritage Hall Of Fame: Piedmontese Cattle



It's been almost two years now since I consumed my first **Piedmontese beef**, some hanger steak and ground chuck that I purchased in Portland. I was floored by the flavor and texture and nothing has even come even close since then. Not wanting to mar the flavor and texture by freezing any of it in my inadequate machine, I consumed it in three to four meals. A trip down to Portland every three to four weeks that summer included a stop for beef. I was

glad that I couldn't get it here in Seattle because I was afraid of developing an addiction that my system wouldn't be able to tolerate. But then again, that was before I knew how different and how good **Piedmontese beef** really was.

Having grown up on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder in the 60s, steak was a rare treat. We mainly ate from the working ends of the cow, fore and aft, but my mom's slow braised pot roasts and stews never made us feel like we were being denied anything - great flavor and mouth feel and sopping good gravy. This may have also contributed to my blasé attitude to beef in the waning years of the 20th century, but industrial steak no doubt made the biggest contribution, or should I say the smallest.

All of the negative factors being attached to the consumption of red meat, especially beef, over the last two decades were just an excuse for me, to gradually walk away from beef. I think it was mainly a lack of 'real' flavor - of course the 'mad cow' scare right here in my back yard didn't help. By then it had come down to the occasional 'safe' burger, and a nice thick, boneless rib eye steak every month or so. Frankly, I really didn't miss it. Then I made the mistake of taking a trip to **Argentina** and **Uruguay** in 2003. It only took a bite or two to trigger something in me, and then it seemed as if I couldn't get enough during the rest of the trip - I was too focused on eating to inquire about the grass-fed breeds, I was enjoying. After the trip I continued my previous routine for about five years, but only when I could find grass-fed beef, or predominantly grass fed anyway.

A subsequent trip to Tuscany a few years later and an impressive **Steak Fiorentina** got me interested in the Italian cattle breeds. While there was a growing number of herds of Piedmontese cattle in the USA, the sources for its beef seemed limited at the time, and I wasn't about to start shipping frozen beef half way across the country. When I stopped to buy some pâté at the **City Market** in the spring of 2008, I found myself staring at fresh **Piedmontese beef from Montana**. Since then I've had **hanger, flank, skirt, bavette, cheeks, chuck roast**, and lots of **ground chuck**, and I've never been disappointed. Even though it has been leaner than the Angus beef sold here in Seattle, it has been more tender, the flavor richer, as if there was an added component, and the mouth feel fuller. It is more satisfying than I ever remember any beef I've had in this country before - but remember, I haven't had much in the last two decades. But, this is what makes Piedmontese beef so special, and why you will be hearing more about it in the future.

This breed developed in the Alpine valleys of what is now Italy's Piemonte region in a process that began at least 25,000 years ago when **Zebu (*Bos indicus*)** that had migrated from what is now Pakistan eventually combined with the massive and now extinct **Auroch (*Bos taurus*)**, ancestor of most European breeds. The most significant result of this pre-historic coupling, for the modern beef eater anyway, is actually considered a genetic defect, but that's getting ahead of the story. At some point in the second half of the 1800s, cattle breeders in Northern Italy began paying attention to these hardy mountain cattle which appeared to have noticeably more muscling than most other breeds, - they referred to as **double muscling** - which resulted in higher yields of finished beef. These factors led to a concerted effort with the breed including the opening of an official herdbook, and breeding programs to eliminate the detrimental traits caused by the double muscling, such as difficulty in calving. It would be 100 more years before scientists would understand what made Piedmontese cattle so special.

Discovered in the 1980s, the **Myostatin** gene is present in all mammals and its function is to restrict muscle growth. At some point in the history of the Piedmontese breed this gene mutated resulting in unrestricted muscle development. Not only does this mutation result in today's Piedmontese cattle having 14% more muscle development than most other breeds, but it also results in beef that is more tender. Piedmontese cattle first arrived in Canada in the late 1970s and then in the USA a few years later, and the number of registered cattle has grown steadily ever since.

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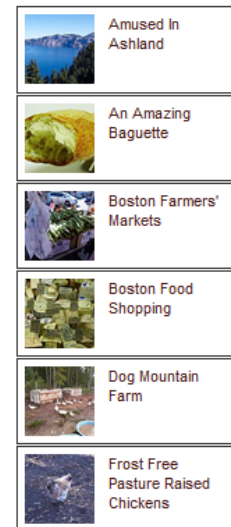
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This breed is proving a boon to farmers and ranchers in this country since it is both a very efficient converter of feed to muscle mass, and it has a higher yield when dressed - this of course may ultimately lead to its rapid industrialization. For the beef eater, this breed is even more of a boon than just an amazing flavor, mouth feel and tenderness. There is significantly less intra-muscular fat in the meat of a pure bred Piedmontese cattle than virtually every other breed.



Statistics from the **Piedmontese Association of the United States (PAUS)** indicate that a 3.5 ounce piece of untrimmed Piedmontese beef has 85% less fat than a similar piece from a conventional US breed, - this also means it has more protein - and about 75% less than a similar sized piece of roasted chicken. It also has less than half of the cholesterol of 'choice' beef from a conventional breed, and less than half of that of skinless chicken. There are other beneficial nutrients present in the beef, like it is lower in saturated fats and higher in poly-unsaturated fats, but I will stop here by mentioning that the **American Heart Association** has endorsed Piedmontese beef as a **"heart healthy" food**. Despite the lower amount of intramuscular fat, Piedmontese beef scores better on the scientifically measured "tenderness" scale than Angus beef. Now for the rest of the story...

It isn't clear what the diet of the Piedmontese cattle used for nutritional testing purposes has been, but given the current focus of the Ag Colleges, it is most likely 'feed' or a combination of feed and pasture - in either case it would seem that beef from an all grass-fed Piedmontese steer would have even better statistics than those quoted by PAUS. Call me cynical, but given its efficiency for converting grain to muscle, and its higher yield of finished beef, the Piedmontese breed becomes the perfect vehicle for Big Ag's industrial feed lots. What will this type of confinement and diet do to the breed? Will the breed's strengths be its ultimate downfall?



Piedmontese beef has made a big splash in the culinary world over the last year or so and so the number of quality restaurants and markets, such as **Lobel's**, in NYC, offering it has increased. It is also more readily available online. It appears that the **"Montana Ranch Brand"** of Piedmontese beef is the one most readily available in markets, especially here on the West Coast, and with online retailers. The Montana Ranch Brand cattle are raised on a series of

family farms that agree to follow the company's strict protocols and practices, including no antibiotics or hormones, all vegetarian feed, and humane ranching practices. They are, however, feedlot operations, and it is not clear how much pasture grazing this entails. I believe that I have only eaten Montana Ranch Brand Piedmontese Beef, but I am partial to grass-fed beef and not just for reasons of flavor and texture. In just an evening of online research, I found that Piedmontese cattle are being raised in at least 36 of the lower 48 states, and I was able to find Piedmontese beef available in 17 states for local or online shipment: CT, GA, IL, IN, MD, MI, MN, MO, MT, NE, OH, OK, PA, TX, UT, VA, and WI. These operations run the gamut from feed lot to 100% pasture raised, and everything in between. I am currently searching for a grass-fed operation close to home, but here are some sources for grass-fed Piedmontese beef, or at least what appear to be grass-fed:

- [Red Bird Farm, Lapeer, MI](#)
- [Skelton Farm, Edinboro, PA](#)
- [Piedmont Ranches \(Fackrell Farms\), Morgon UT](#)
- [Barlow Beef @ Wik'e Brothers' Farm Sharon, CT](#)
- [Silver Leaf Farm, Litchfield, MN](#)
- [Jeff-Leen Farm, Random Lake, WI](#)
- [Avalon Acres, Hohenwald, TN](#)
- [Half Circle Ranch, Belgrade, MT](#)

The images are from the the **National Association of Piemontese Cattle Breeders of Italy (ANABORAPI)** website.

Posted at 03:14 PM in [Eat Me: Specialty Food Reviews](#), [Finding Our Heritage](#), [Tradition Envy](#) | [Permalink](#)  
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