

## FAQ's – Buying Whole Animal Meat Direct from Your Local Farmers

By Teagan Moran, OSU Extension Services

People become interested in purchasing meat directly from a farm versus from the grocery store or a butcher for a variety of reasons; to support a local economy, sustainable farming practices, quality etc. Chefs and consumers alike are purchasing direct from farms for the flavor benefits. Buying direct from a farm means that a consumer can talk to the producer directly and can gain confidence in the quality of meat they are purchasing. A consumer can match their values with producers, whether that is supporting a local food system and economy, animal welfare, personal health, environmental impact, organic, or other farming or business practices. Farming practices are far more nuanced and complex than a label on a package can convey. In addition, food labels can be confusing. Conversations with farmers can help address those nuances. That being said, it takes time and coordination to buy direct from farm, and the process can be confusing. We hope this FAQ will help.

### **How much does it cost? Is it more or less expensive than the store?**

Local small farm produced meat can be more expensive than buying from the store. Our large industrial meat system is designed to produce meat as cheaply and efficiently as possible. The cost difference changes when you start comparing production methods (grass fed versus soy or corn, use of antibiotics, humanely raised, etc). If you have the freezer space, buying whole animals direct from farm will often be *less expensive for the same or better quality of meat* you would get 'by the cut' at the grocery store. That cost is determined as you average your price per pound over all the different cuts you end up with. A challenge and added benefit is that the expense is upfront – so food dollars can be budgeted. Buying direct from the farm will be a big line-item in your food budget, and it will take time and organization – but it doesn't have to be your only source of meat.

Whole animal meat is sold at a certain price per pound from the farm and often the pricing is based on the *hanging weight* of the animal. There will then be additional costs associated with the slaughter and butcher (generally a per pound fee). Terms to know include: live weight,



dressed or hot hanging weight and boxed or cut weight. **Live weight** is how much the animal weighs prior to slaughter (when it is still alive). After it is slaughtered, the head, skin, hooves and other unusable parts of the animal are removed, leaving the **dressed or hot hanging weight** (which varies depending on the animal). The farmer should be able to give you a fairly accurate estimate or a range of hanging weights based on previous years. Once the animal has been aged or butchered, the weight decreases again. So what you finally end up with is **the boxed weight or cut weight**. Again, a farmer should be able to give you an estimate. Most farms charge by the hanging weight – you will then pay the butcher separately.

For a complete guide on buying an animal share see The Beef and Pork Whole Animal Buying Guide: <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/Beef-and-Pork-Whole-Animal-Buying-Guide>. It should be noted that the size, taste, and texture of grass fed meat will vary from what is commonly found in grocery stores. This has to do with the feed, breed, grazing practices and often the absence of growth hormones.

### **How will it be sold? What does by the cut versus by the share mean?**

In grocery stores or butcher shops you can buy meat *by the cut*. When you buy direct from a farm you will have the option to buy *by the share*, meaning you a shareholder of the live animal. This can include buying a whole animal, a half, or a quarter animals (or even eighths). You will still have the option to have a butcher cut the animal how you like. If you don't know what you like, a butcher can guide you through the selection process. They will ask questions like – would you like more ground meat than X, or how thick do you like your chops/steaks? Do you want the cute bone-in?

### **What is that? What if I don't know what to do with a certain animal part?**

When buying a whole animal you have the option to keep parts of the animal that you may not normally buy at the grocery store – like tongue or liver. This can lead to some experimental cooking and the discovery of a new taste – Ever tried bone broth? Here is an article that offers some recommendations, Are you throwing away valuable food?



[https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/are\\_you\\_throwing\\_away\\_valuable\\_food\\_part\\_three\\_meat](https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/are_you_throwing_away_valuable_food_part_three_meat).

Another option is to ask that your butcher keeps unwanted parts on your behalf (but remember that you paid for those parts, why give them away?).

### **Where am I going to store it?**

Depending on the share size you are looking in to, you may need to invest in a chest freezer to accommodate the meat. Alternatively, it is common for people to share with family and friends or with another household (or more) to reduce the cost of high-quality meat without the need to store it all themselves. A typical refrigerator has enough freezer storage for about 100 lbs of meat. Meat and poultry can also be preserved for a long time – check out this article for tips on how to do just that! Let's Preserve Meat and Poultry <https://extension.psu.edu/lets-preserve-meat-and-poultry>

### **What does “custom-exempt” mean for slaughter or processing?**

Slaughter and processing businesses that operate under this exemption are inspected by both the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the USDA once or twice a year. (This is not the same as daily or continuous inspection for USDA-inspected processors.) Custom-exempt slaughter and processing (also called “cut and wrap”) plants are expected to meet the same requirements for sanitation and construction that USDA-inspected plants must meet, along with keeping certain records. Buying custom-exempt meat means that you are purchasing a share of the live animal; you are not purchasing packaged meat. The final packaged meat will be stamped “Not for Sale”. This is why a farmer who uses custom exempt processors cannot sell you cuts of meat.

The above answer was taken from the article: Frequently Asked Questions: Using Custom-Exempt Slaughter and Processing Facilities in Oregon for Beef, Pork, Lamb & Goat by Lauren Gwin. Follow the link to learn more: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/business-economics/management/frequently-asked-questions-using-custom-exempt-slaughter-processing>



## How do I find a farm?

So you know that you want to buy shares from a farm – but what farms sell this way? Not all farms advertise, and you may not feel comfortable approaching farmers at the market or cold calling. Here are some options for our region:

- Oregon Pasture Network Product Guide - <http://www.friendsoffamilyfarmers.org/opn-product-guide/>
- Eat Wild Directory - <http://www.eatwild.com/products/oregon.html>
- Check out the Locally Grown Guide: <http://willamettefarmandfood.org/find-local-food/>
- Call your local Extension Office – Small Farms Program –we work with local famers and will often know who sells the meat you are looking for commercially.
- Your local farmers market vendor list

As you are selecting a farm – some questions you may want to ask include:

- Do you sell shares and/or cuts? How is the price per pound determined? Is there extra cost for butchering or is that figured into the cost?
- When will the animals be ready for slaughter?
- How do you raise your animals and why? Are they on pasture? For what percentage of the year are they on pasture?
- What are you feeding them? There are a wide range of feed options (certified organic, conventional with soy and/or corn) Even if animals are not certified organic they may be eating a high quality diet. This may impact your purchase choice.
- How do you treat sick animals?
- Can I visit the farm and see the animals? Do you do tours? Most farms will say yes, even if they don't have a tour program. That being said, farms are very busy and also have high risk for liability or concerns around biosecurity. Just because they say no – does not mean they are hiding something. You can always ask to see pictures, or ask if they have an online presence.