

mones or antibiotics are used. After all, crowded feedlots only work if the animals are given drugs to protect them from diseases that can result from such conditions.

So instead of being packed in and fed a diet of corn and animal by-products, these animals eat more as they would eat in nature and mill around more freely.

"I think people think if an animal is better treated, it's better for you, which is generally correct," says Smithfield's O'Brien. He believes conventionally raised animals are treated humanely for this very reason. But many consumers want to go beyond that.

"There are some expectations consumers have that they're buying these products from a sunny farm, with hills and valleys. A family farm. It's an idyllic perception," he says.

Some products are certified humane. "There are certifying agencies that you can use to audit your farms," says Applegate's McDonnell. "We do have that label on some. We're trying to get it done on all of them."

PAYING MORE FOR FEWER CUT CORNERS

Raising animals without the use of pesticides, hormones or antibiotics takes longer and costs more than raising them conventionally. In the case of organics, the costs jump

even higher, partly because of the current shortage in organic foods, especially milk.

Organic cheese, for example, costs far more than non-organic. "It takes 10 pounds of milk to make one pound of cheese," explains Organic Valley's Marquez. "That's a lot of expensive milk to make an expensive cheese." Even so, "The overall organic category is growing faster than it's ever grown."

The supply of organic milk may catch up with demand by spring, with perhaps better prices and certainly more availability. "Probably by April, you'll see a lot more organic milk and organic cheese. We're increasing our own supply by about 40 percent," she says.

Animals raised without antibiotics are more expensive than conventionally raised. "A lot of antibiotics act like steroids," explains McDonnell. "It accelerates their growth rate." And the faster they grow, the cheaper they are.

According to Maverick's Moore, "We have the lowest food costs in the world, and a lot of people don't want to raise that. But what's the health cost?"

That's a question a lot of educated consumers are asking themselves.

Marquez believes many Americans buy organic food simply because they can. "People are choosing to buy organic because their food bills are so cheap they realize they can

spend a little bit more for food they think is better for them."

DOES NATURAL TASTE BETTER?

"The bottom line is, the products that sell the best are the most flavorful," says Smithfield's O'Brien. "The flavor of a natural product isn't necessarily better."

Marquez agrees. "Are there great organic cheeses? Yes. Are they consistently better tasting than conventional cheeses? No."

But while "natural" does not always mean "delicious," natural meats do have an advantage over meat that has been processed with additives.

"If you want to reduce the cost of a product, you have to put in additives to hold water," explains Coleman's Jenkins. "Water's cheaper than meat, obviously."

But all that added water also dilutes the flavor and gives meat a more rubbery texture. "When we did focus groups, the comments were that our natural meat tastes like it's right off the bone, like a Thanksgiving turkey or a Christmas ham," says Jenkins.

Quijano of Plainville Farms agrees. "It's a texture. There's more of a taste of day-after-Thanksgiving turkey. Once you taste the difference, it's tough to go back." **DB**



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