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The New York Times

Late Edition
New York: Today, mostly cloudy with scattered showers, high 82. Tonight, showers, then drier, low 65. Tomorrow, partly sunny, high 78. Yesterday, high 87, low 77. Details, Page D8.

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ONE DOLLAR

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Dining In

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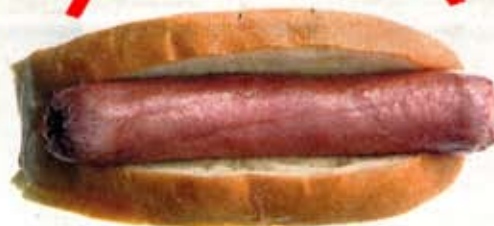
The Natural Dogs



TOP DOG



MASS APPEAL



THE MAKEOVER

GRASS FED: THE NEW ALLURE OF THE ORGANIC FRANKFURTER

TOP DOG The best grass-fed organic franks are made in small batches with limited distribution. This dog is from Dines Farms in the Catskills.

MASS APPEAL A widely available grass-fed frank from Applegate Farms organically replicates the old ballpark hot dog's taste.

MAKEOVER Organic Valley's beef frank was once among the worst of the crop. But it was transformed through new curing techniques.

By KIM SEVERSON

THE star of the wienie roast has fallen on hard times. In a country increasingly enamored of specialty sausages and natural beef, hot dog sales have slumped. But a new dog might save the day, one that is better for the environment and the animals, healthier for the body and, perhaps most important, doesn't taste like some kind of jailhouse punishment lunch.

The politically correct frankfurter. In the past four years sales of packaged organic hot dogs have increased sharply. Although organic dogs have been around for at least a decade, the new models on the market taste better, have healthier fat profiles and are made from animals that spend their lives eating nothing but pasture.

The key is that the curing code has recently been cracked. Instead of relying on sodium nitrates or the more common sodium nitrites for color, texture and shelf life, hot dog makers have found a magic solution of celery juice, lactic acid and sea salt that rescues the organic dog from its tough brown reputation and rockets it to pink juiciness. It also addresses the concern among some consumers and scientists that nitrites and nitrates might contribute to cancer.

For parents like Andrea Slonosky, a media librarian at Long Island University in Brooklyn, a better dog is a big relief. She has a toddler who loves them. If it is meaty and cylindrical, he'll eat it.

She often buys packages with an organic label, however uneasily. After all, they're still hot dogs. "I really have to try

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For Natural Dogs, a Growing Appetite



Alex Wilson/The New York Times

FROM PASTURE TO BUN Mary Scott, above, gets her dog just right at the Let's Be Frank stand outside AT&T Park in San Francisco. The stand sells hot dogs made of grass-fed beef from the Hearst Ranch. Right, a lunch of Dines Farms grass-fed beef hot dogs at Sparky's in Manhattan.



Don Riquar/Charles/The New York Times

Continued From First Dining Page

not to think too hard about the fact that organic unthinkable meat scraps are still unthinkable meat scraps," Ms. Slonosky said.

The reasonable reader (and, certainly, the reasonable vegetarian reader) might be wondering why Ms. Slonosky gives her family hot dogs at all. But that reader probably does not have children and has never worried about getting enough protein into their little carb-stuffed bodies. Besides, why try to deny a kid a hot dog?

Americans eat almost \$2 billion worth of hot dogs a year, whether deep-fried Italian style in Jersey, spiked with sport peppers in Chicago or batter-dipped in Texas. Almost 30 million hot dogs will be eaten at the nation's ballparks this year.

Still, the national appetite for conventional hot dogs is waning. The amount of packaged hot dogs sold has dropped by more than 6 percent over the past four years, to 77.4 million pounds from \$25.8 million pounds, according to a new report from ACNielsen, the market research company. (Figures don't include sales at Wal-Mart, which doesn't release such data.)

Hot dogs labeled organic, although still a tiny slice of the market, have boomed. During the same period, the number of pounds of organic dogs sold has increased 21 percent, to 1.2 million.

Stephen McDonnell, who founded the natural meat company Applegate Farms in 1987 and remains its chief executive, argues that the hot dog revolution should center on beef from animals that eat only pasture rather than the standard diet of grain. Beef from cattle raised on grass is leaner and has a healthier dose of omega-3 fatty acids, the kind found in fish like salmon and mackerel. As a result, he said, the dogs are healthier.

After working for a decade on the formula, Mr. McDonnell this month introduced low-priced nitrate-free hot dogs made with grass-fed beef from Uruguay.

Sold under the name the Great Organic Hot Dog, they look just like those plump, salty, chemically pink dogs served on buses at sporting events and from street carts. The suggested price is \$4.99 a pound; that's a dollar or so more than a pound of Ball Park franks, although on the third of July Great Organics were \$5.69 at one Brooklyn supermarket.

Mr. McDonnell's hot dog even eats like the inexpensive hot dogs that dominate the market, with that slightly rubbery, juicy texture. And that was his secret plan: make the organic grass-fed dog taste just like the mass-market favorite.

"If we can introduce a whole new group of people to healthy food through a hot dog, oh my god, the lateral impact is enormous," Mr. McDonnell said.

Although serious hot dog fans prefer the snap of a natural casing, Mr. Applegate's dogs — like most — are formed with a cellulose casing, which is removed before packaging. "We don't do skin at this point because we are after the mainstream shopper," he said. "You can't take America's fa-

vorite food and change it to that degree and expect widespread acceptance."

Mr. McDonnell is selling a couple of other styles of organic hot dogs that are made from animals raised on grain. The new dogs will be the first completely grass-fed wieners in the country to be sold at mainstream markets like Publix and Safeway.

Staff members of the Dining section held a blind taste test of several organic and grass-fed skinless uncured hot dogs aimed at the mass market. The Applegate grass-fed dogs were a close second to Nathan's, a conventional hot dog thrown in as a ringer.

The Applegate dog had not quite half the fat of Nathan's, and about 25 percent less sodium.

We also found that two versions of Organic Valley's organic uncured hot dogs provided a perfect snapshot of the difference the new vegetable juice curing technique can make. The company's original organic dogs, which have been made since the late 1990's, were everything one would fear in an uncured organic dog: without an effective alternative to nitrates, they had a dense, dry texture and an unappealing brown color.

The new versions, made from Midwestern cattle whose diet was at least 85 percent grass, were springier and juicy. It was night and day.

Beyond the mass market are the elite athletes of the grass-fed hot dog movement. These are boutique dogs, made in smaller batches with beef from herds raised not far from where the dogs are sold. They have a more distinctive flavor and texture than any mass-market versions we tasted and are showing up in increasing numbers, both at

farmers' markets and at new high-end hot dog stands in New York and San Francisco.

The emphasis is on local beef, in keeping with the emerging notion that local sustainable food is a better economic and social choice than a mass-marketed product, even one that carries an organic label.

Among those I've tasted on both coasts, the Dines Farms beef dog is a favorite. Made from animals that graze on Catskill Mountains pasture in Oak Hill, N.Y., the hot dogs have a natural casing that snaps lightly, revealing a fine-textured interior with lots of juice and a pleasant, meaty flavor.

They are available in packages at only a handful of Greenmarkets and natural food stores in New York City. And for \$2.50 (\$3.50 with toppings), you can get one steamed and nestled in a bun from Amy's Bread at Sparky's in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or on Bleecker Street in Manhattan.

On the other coast, when the Ginans are playing a home game at AT&T Park in San Francisco, Sue Moore and Larry Bain roll out their Let's Be Frank cart and start grilling their version of the new hot dog. It is made with pasture-fed beef from the 80,000-acre Hearst Ranch in San Simeon, Calif., and stuffed into lamb casings. (The franks can be bought online at letsbefrankdogs.com.)

On a nice day, from their cart at the ballpark and another at Crissy Field, a park near the base of the Golden Gate Bridge, they can sell 400.

Let's Be Franks are more russet than pink, and their pleasantly rough texture and extra-juicy bite makes them more robust, more like a sausage than most hot dogs from grass-fed beef.

Getting the texture of nitrate-free grass-fed beef to mimic a mass-market hot dog is tricky. The nature of the fat in an animal fed on pasture is different from that of one raised on grain. There is less saturated fat, and the animals tend to be leaner, so when the meat is being chopped into hot dog paste, dog makers have to carefully balance temperature, water levels and the pace of emulsification.

"To the American palate corn-fed beef fat

A star of ballparks and picnics, in a healthier form.

tastes like butter," Mr. McDonnell said. "You have to deal with the leanness issue and the fat taste issue or most Americans are not going to accept a natural version of a hot dog."

Ms. Moore of Let's Be Frank said it took five attempts and six months to find a recipe that both tasted authentic and had a texture that was enough like a hot dog.

"We just really wanted to do excellent street food," she said. But they also wanted to offer a healthier alternative.

"What people can't get their minds around is that hot dogs can be good for them," she said. "So instead of saying that, we say it's an old-fashioned hot dog."

Their hot dog is also an inexpensive way to deliver the gospel of locally raised grass-

fed beef to the masses. Many hot dog eaters are not going to drop a lot of cash on an aged grass-fed porterhouse, but they might spend \$5 to see what the buzz is about.

Using local grass-fed beef in a hot dog or a hamburger reduces consumption of fuel in transportation and feed production and helps local ranchers stay in business, Ms. Moore said. Let's Be Frank uses grass-fed cuts that restaurateurs and retailers generally don't buy — the plate, the shoulder clod and the chuck roll. And the company hopes to go national, relying on a network of regional ranchers and processors.

Grass-fed purists who use local beef raise an eyebrow at Mr. McDonnell for importing his beef all the way from Uruguay. He does so because the meat costs less — important in moving grass-fed dogs to the masses. Grazing land in the United States is expensive, and the beef business isn't designed for large pasture-feeding operations.

"In Uruguay there's just 2,000-acre farm after 2,000-acre farm," he said. "It's open grass. It's in the culture of Uruguay."

Besides, he said, beef isn't like fruit or vegetables, which can suffer when transported thousands of miles.

And then there are those in the healthy-dog game who think grass fed isn't necessarily better and nitrates aren't necessarily bad for you. Bill Niman, the onetime rancher from Northern California who began the beef and pork company that bears his name, introduced Fearless Franks in 1997.

The name played to people afraid of what lands in conventional dogs. It was one of the first in the market that tasted good and was made without hormones or antibiotics. His animals, grown on ranches in the West, start out eating pasture grass and are finished on grain. He maintains that the mix creates the kind of flavor Americans like.

Most grass-fed animals eat hay and other feed when the grass isn't growing in winter months, a feeding method that Mr. Niman says is less sustainable and energy-efficient than using a highly caloric grain diet at the end of the animal's life.

And he offers both a version without sodium nitrate, largely to get on the shelves of Whole Foods, and one that uses the compound as a preservative.

Hebrew National hasn't failed to notice the consumer appetite for a healthier dog. Its parent, ConAgra Foods, last month began a television campaign focused on the unique aspects of Hebrew National franks. They aren't organic or necessarily nutritionally better than many brands, but they are made in accordance with kosher dietary laws, which means the cuts of meat from the front half of the animal are used and the butchering and processing meet specific religious standards.

For many parents looking for a healthier way to keep their youngsters in hot dogs, all the action on the hot dog is welcome news.

Nati Porat, a nursery-school teacher in Park Slope, Brooklyn, has started buying nitrate-free hot dogs designated organic or natural. "I don't know if I should be trusting them, but I kind of have faith," she said. "I never ate hot dogs before I had kids. I was actually health-conscious."

It Takes More Than a Hot Fire and a Cold Beer

HOT DOGS might seem like the easiest thing in the world to prepare. And in many ways they are. Most are already fully cooked and require only heat. But anything worth heating and eating takes a little technique to make it really good.

The first thing to consider when cooking a dog is whether it has a casing. Skinless dogs are the most popular. They are too delicate to spend much time on a griddle or a grill, even though some people love nothing more than a hot dog charred by fire or split and fried hard in a pan.

The best method, advocated by Stephen McDonnell of Applegate Farms and supported by my tests, is to set them in a pot of water and bring the water barely to a simmer. The

dogs will be heated through, and the water bath will take away some of the fat but leave the juiciness and plumpness. The same effect can be achieved in a microwave oven in a few minutes, depending on the number of dogs.

For a frank made with a natural casing, the griddle is best. Some people prefer to start the dogs off in a steamer or simmered in a little water. But I think heating the dogs through in a cast iron pan or on a griddle allows more time for the skin to caramelize and crisp a bit.

The worst thing is to allow a dog to get so hot so fast that the skin splits. It's a waste of juice and ruins its looks.

KIM SEVERSON



Carl Gustafson/The New York Times