

Cow-Pooling Made Easy

Cow-Pooling 101—from sourcing and ordering to storing and defrosting—here are the basics if you’re thinking about starting a cow-pool. By: Kim Cross



At *Cooking Light*, we dove into the subject of grass-fed versus grain-fed cows by starting our own cow-pool. We bought half a Brangus cow that was pasture-raised by Alabama farmer [Melissa Boutwell](#), a farmer local to our Birmingham-based editorial office. Here’s a 10-point guide from what we learned:

1. **Find your cow:** Locate a pasture-based farm near you by searching the state-by-state directory on [EatWild.com](#), which also has a library of scientific research on the topic. If you don’t want to buy in bulk, Google “meat CSA” and the name of the nearest city. Sometimes the best place to start is a farmer’s market – find one near you on [LocalHarvest.org](#).
2. **Ask questions:** Legit grass-fed producers welcome them. Do they practice rotational grazing? What breeds are best? (The “right” answer varies by region, but generally small-framed breeds – Angus, Hereford, Red Hereford, British White, Shorthorn, Murray Gray, and others – gain weight on grass best. If you can’t visit the farm, at least taste a sample before you buy.
3. **Buy in season:** Like produce, meat has peak seasons. For beef, it’s typically mid-spring to September, after the lushest, greenest pastures. Many farmers need advance notice, so order 2 to 6 weeks ahead
4. **Do the math:** A half-cow will feed a family of four for almost a year and costs around \$1200 to \$1500. The per-pound price – which ranges from \$3.50 to \$5.00 a pound nationally—is the hanging weight (the hot carcass weight after slaughter). After butchering, expect to take home about 55% to 65% of that.
5. **Fill out a cut sheet:** Most farmers provide a planning sheet that walks you through the key decisions. Think about how you cook: Do you want more ground beef or stew meat? Ground chuck and sirloin can comprise 30-45% of your take-home meat (we got 80 pounds). If you enjoy [braising](#) or [slow-cooking](#), you might want more roasts. If you’re a [Superfast](#) cook, quick-defrosting ground beef is your friend.
6. **Make room for the beef:** A half-cow, including organs and meat, takes up about 10 cubic feet of freezer space. To save space and money, roast the bones to make stock, then freeze the liquid in gallon zippered bags laid flat—they’ll fit in the nooks and crannies of your freezer.
7. **Choose paper or plastic:** Some people claim the meat tastes better when tightly wrapped in butcher paper, but plastic tends to last longer. “If you’re looking for the best quality product in your freezer, cryovac is the way to go,” says Chris Raines, Professor of Meat Science at Penn State University. Vacuum-packed meat can wet age in the refrigerator for several days to a week, tenderizing the meat without spoiling.

8. **Prolong shelf life:** Minimize handling, which can puncture the seal, exposing meat to air and freezer-burn. "You could keep well-packaged paper-wrapped meats for six months, and cryovac meats for a year," Raines says. "But I've had meat that's two years old and it's been fine."
9. **Defrost properly:** Never nuke it! Defrosting in a microwave will produce a dry, rubbery mess. Defrost overnight in a nonreactive dish in the refrigerator. If you've purchased paper-wrapped meat, it may bleed out, but don't worry – just turn the meat so it will reabsorb the juices. For quick defrosting, run cryovac packed beef under cold water for 20 minutes.
10. **Cook it right:** As a rule, cook hot and fast or low and slow. For tougher cuts, explore techniques beyond braising, says Krasner. "Meat destined for roasting or grilling can be marinated overnight in red wine and spices, or yogurt and garlic, before cooking, or it can be roasted for a long time at an extremely low temperature, or pounded before cooking, or sliced thinly against the grain to make a more tender mouthfeel."

Kim Cross



The Cow-Pooler's Cookbook

Good Meat, by Deborah Krasner (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2010; \$40) Krasner's is the first major cookbook dedicated to grass-fed and pastured meats, including beef, pork, lamb, chicken, duck, and rabbit. There's practical, comprehensive information on sourcing sustainable meats, along with butchering illustrations and more than 200 recipes.