



Niche Terms and Attributes – What Do They Really Mean?

Some of the niche terminology used to describe alternative or specialty meat product attributes today is better understood than others. Some terms have consistent meaning from person to person. Others may mean different things to different people.

Labeling requirements can be broad. So if you're looking for specific niche attributes, check the label to see if they're listed. That, along with a basic understanding of USDA production/labeling requirements, will help you get what you're looking for.

Some of the popular attributes in the market today include:

Locally Grown – One of the more easily understood terms and without USDA guidelines attached, although what defines "local" may vary from one person to another. For some it may represent a drive to a farmer's market, for others it may be a broader geographic region. The reasons why people support locally grown products (i.e. keep money in the community, know where food comes from, support agriculture) may influence their definition.

Free Range – Also referred to as "pasture raised, free roaming, and raised outdoors." The USDA standard to make this claim for pork is that hogs have had continuous access to pasture for at least 80% of their production cycle.

No Antibiotics Used, Raised without Antibiotics – "No antibiotics added" on the label means that the animals were raised without using antibiotics and that documentation has been provided to USDA demonstrating this.

Natural – Pork products that meet compliance with USDA Natural Standards which means the product contains no artificial ingredients or added color and is only minimally processed. The label must explain the use of the term natural (such as no added colorings or artificial ingredients; minimally processed).

Naturally Raised – There is currently no USDA standard for making a "naturally raised" claim on pork products, and definitions may vary from one naturally raised pork product to another. Attributes that may contribute to a hog being "naturally raised" might include raised without antibiotics, growth promotants or animal by-products in the feed, use of deep straw bedding, raised outdoors, etc. These attributes will likely be stated on packaging or in marketing materials.

Organic – Pork products that meet compliance with USDA Organic Standards. This involves an entire process in which synthetic inputs into all phases of animal production, meat processing and handling are prohibited. Labeling rules have been established by the USDA for products claiming to be organic and include four categories.



100% organic – Products produced exclusively using organic methods as defined by the USDA. *Can carry the USDA organic certification seal.*



Organic – 95% or greater of the ingredients (by weight, excluding water and salt) are organically produced with the remaining five percent of ingredients on the National List of Allowed Synthetic and Prohibited Non-Synthetic Substances. *Can carry the USDA organic certification seal.*

Made with organic – 70-95% of the ingredients are organically produced and would be displayed on the principle display panel as "Made with organic [specific ingredient(s)]."

Less than 70% organic – These products have the option to include "X% organic" on the information panel and only need to list organic ingredients on the ingredient statement.

For more information on the National Organic Program: www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexNet.htm

Breed Specific – Just as there are breed-specific beef products like Certified Angus Beef, there are breed-specific pork products. Sometimes referred to as heirloom or heritage breeds, examples in the marketplace today include Berkshire (also known as Kurobuta meaning "black pig"), Duroc, and Tamworth.

For full disclosure of USDA definitions and guidelines, refer to the links below:

Production/Labeling: www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/stand/claim.htm

Organic Certification: www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexNet.htm

Certification Programs: www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/mgc/cert.htm

Process Verification Programs (PVPs): <http://processverified.usda.gov/>

COOL (Country of Origin Labeling): www.ams.usda.gov/cool/

USDA requirements are continually updating, some definitions may be considered interim and subject to change.

Sources: USDA website, National Pork Board 2001 "Issues & Answers, Organic and Natural Pork"