

I want to buy locally produced meats but I also want to be safe. How do I know if meat is processed in a way that will not make me sick?

Slaughtering and processing regulations vary in how the meat is being sold. All slaughterhouses have to comply with laws and regulations governing sanitation, cleanliness, equipment, and handling, including safe and sanitary practices among employees. These laws and regulations minimize the likeliness of contaminated or unsafe meat. Consumers are also responsible after buying meat that they use safe handling and cooking practices.

How a farmer markets or sells his product defines which type of processing facility options a farmer has. Direct marketing usually involves the farmer going to a state or local custom exempt slaughterhouse and processing facility although they can still go to a USDA inspected plant. Direct marketing involves the farmer working face to face with their consumer. The customer(s) that the farmer is working directly with essentially buys the live animal. For example four families can buy a cow together, and each receive a quarter of the animal. The customers often work with the butcher to decide the cuts they would like, the thickness, and if they want bone-in or out. When a farmer decides to direct market and process their animals through a custom exempt facility the frozen meat is essentially not for sale because it was already bought "live" prior to the slaughtering. This direct marketing is sometimes called freezer trade. When buying meat direct from a farmer you have the opportunity to visit the farm, ask questions regarding animal husbandry and welfare, and even have an opportunity to meet the butcher or processor that processes the animal. Buying local meat creates transparency.

In NYS, meat is sold wholesale or retail when sold to restaurants, colleges, grocery stores, food hubs, or distribution outlets. This wholesale or retail marketing has to be USDA inspected. This means that each USDA slaughter and processing facility has an inspector that makes sure all procedures are up to standard. These include inspecting the animals prior to slaughter, the carcasses, facility, equipment, and employees. The animal must be humanely stunned and rendered unconscious prior to slaughtering unless the slaughterhouse has a religious exemption. When a farmer processes their animals at a USDA facility they have a broader audience to sell to.

Buying local whether it is USDA inspected or custom exempt is a great opportunity to build a strong resilient community, relationships, and economy. If you would like more information on how to contact local farmers you can call your local Cornell Cooperative Extension; go to <http://www.comefarmwithus.com/>, a local website created by Jefferson County Economic Development that allows you to find local farmers and other agricultural businesses; or go to www.meatsuite.com, a NYS website that farmers use to sell their bulk meat.

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