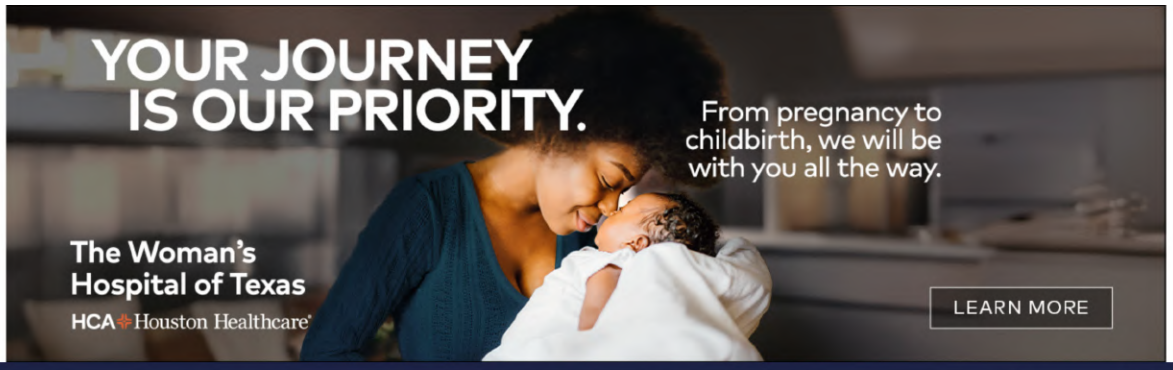

RESTAURANT & FOOD NEWS

Beef is selling for record highs at the grocery store. Here's why.

By **Aviva Bechky**, *Staff Writer*
Oct 16, 2025

Cattle are shown on a pasture run by Brian Findeisen of Erbe Ranch in Cat Spring Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

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Beef is selling for record highs at the grocery store. Here's why.
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In June, ground beef prices in the U.S. hit a record high of $6.12 per pound.

In July, they broke that record again — $6.25 a pound.

And in August, retail prices climbed higher still: an average $6.32 per pound across the country, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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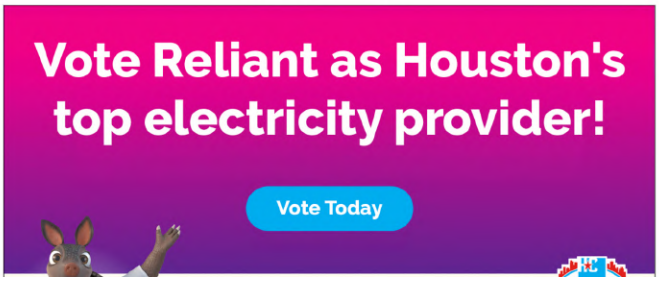

Overall, the USDA projected in September that prices on beef and veal would rise a full 11.6% in 2025, compared to less than 2% for pork or poultry.

A pasture run by Brian Findeisen of Erbe Ranch is shown in Cat Spring Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

In short: It's a historically bad time for beef buyers. U.S. cattle herd sizes have fallen since 2019, while ranchers face high costs for essentials like hay and fuel. Cattle imports from Mexico have been halted over outbreaks of flesh-eating screwworm. New tariffs are also driving up beef prices from other sources, including Brazil, which sent 691 million pounds to the U.S. last year.

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At the same time, demand has held steady. Americans ate an average of 14.9 pounds of beef per person in the second quarter of this year, up from 14.5 pounds during the same period last year, according to USDA data.

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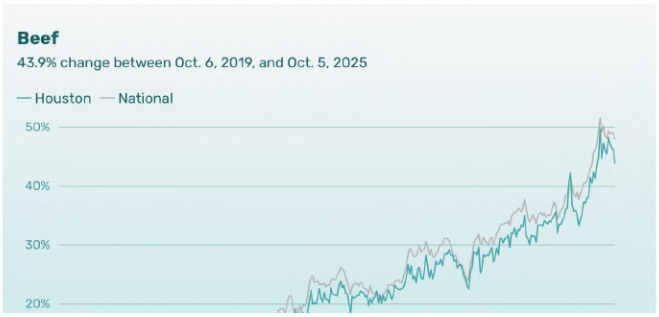
And while Texas leads the nation in cattle production, prices are largely set nationally, according to Texas A&M livestock economist David Anderson. That means beef generally isn't cheaper here than anywhere else.



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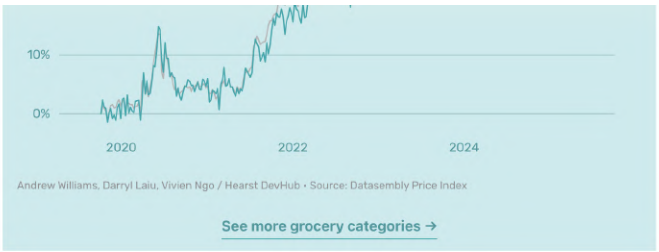

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But while shoppers feel the pinch at the grocery store and in local restaurants, few understand what it actually takes to get beef to the table, or the combination of forces driving prices higher.

"Everybody just takes it for granted because they walk into stores where it's like Willy Wonka's wonderland of meat everywhere," said Felix Florez, the founder of Black Hill Meats and partner in Red Field Ranch. "They don't understand how difficult it was to get that meat there."

The cattle supply

Doug Bass, owner, left, and Bradley Jemelka, auctioneer, second from left, are shown at the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction in Columbus Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

Bradley Jemelka spat numbers into his mic so fast they blurred together on a recent Wednesday morning, eyes darting over the 20 or so cattle buyers before him. From his black swivel chair atop the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction stage, he watched as a pair of Red Brangus bulls hustled into the ring.

The bids climbed higher. $2,400 apiece? Yes! Sold — to Jeff Lacina, who hoped to buy about 300 cows that day for a couple of different companies.

As men prodded the bulls out of the gate, a 3-year-old pregnant heifer took their place, and Jemelka's voice was already onto the next lot.

Left: Stephen Gunn moves cattle into pens at the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction in Columbus Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025. Right: The Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.

That rhythm would repeat hundreds of times before the day was over — and at prices far higher than a few years ago. Lacina said he could once have bought those bulls for about half what he paid this month.

That's the natural response to a squeeze in cattle supply, and the chief cause of rising prices at the grocery store, according to several industry experts. The U.S. cattle herd has decreased steadily in size since 2019, declining from 94.7 million cattle head then to 86.7 million cattle head this year, per the USDA. The shrinkage was exacerbated by

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droughts in various parts of the country.

A cow is shown at the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction in Columbus Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

In fact, the national herd recently hit its lowest point since 1951. The country is still producing more beef compared to 70 years ago, since each cow yields far more meat than it would have back then, but the drop in recent years is still significant.

Despite that, industry experts also offered some hope for struggling consumers.

"What we're experiencing in beef prices is a very normal, cyclical experience in our business," said Shelby Horn, the general manager for Abell Livestock Company and a member of the board of directors for the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. "Every 10 years we have this kind of consolidation in the cow herd."

U.S. beef production has fallen after peaking in 2022

Industry experts said beef production typically rises and falls on a 10 year cycle. It's currently dipping.

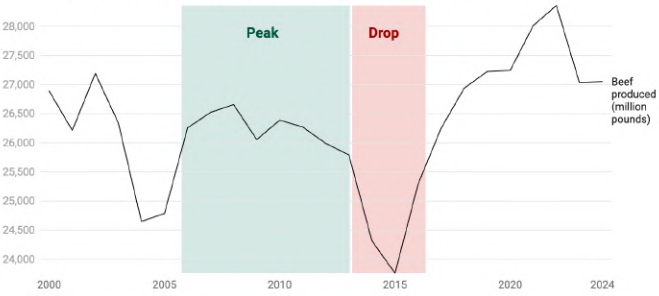


Chart: Aviva Bechky/Houston Chronicle • Source: USDA • Created with Datawrapper

This is the result of tension between cow herd sizes and beef prices, Horn said.

When beef prices are up, as they are now, that's often a result of higher cattle prices. Higher cattle prices, naturally, motivate ranchers to raise more cows. And though it takes a few years to see the payoff, eventually more beef hits the market, lowering prices at the grocery store. (Price tags never fully return to previous lows, though, thanks to inflation.) However, when prices dip, each cow sells for less and less. And once ranchers aren't making enough money, they start to slaughter more of their herds, shrinking the beef supply again.

"It's just an economic equation," Horn said. "When we lose money, we're going to kill cows. When we make money, we're going to make more."

The national herd hasn't begun to rebound yet, leaving ranchers with tough choices.

Brian Findeisen of the Erbe Ranch talks about his cattle in Cat Spring Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

In Cat Spring and Columbus, 52-year-old rancher Brian Findeisen of Erbe Ranch runs about 140 cows and calves across four properties, letting them roam free and graze on the available grass. Findeisen's antibiotic- and hormone-free beef sells briskly at Houston farmers markets, helping offset rising costs for gas and equipment. He recently took over additional acreage from his father, who's nearing 90, putting him in a strong position to grow.

But expanding means taking one of two paths, neither of which are easy.

Left: Brian Findeisen of Erbe Ranch in Cat Spring Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025. Right: Findeisen's cows roam on pasture on Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.

First, he could buy more heifers, young female cows, for the tune of some $2,500 or more. That's up from $1,000 a year and a half ago, he said.

"If it goes up again next year," he warned, "we may not be able to afford it." But even now, the price is higher than he wants to pay.

So Findeisen is planning to "reserve" some of the heifers he has right now, saving them to breed instead of sending them to the slaughterhouse. But that means he has to wait for the heifers to reach breeding age, care for them throughout the nine-month gestation period and then raise the calves before his investment produces any meat.

Brian Findeisen of Erbe Ranch closes a gate on his property in Cat Spring Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

In the meantime, the amount of beef he sells will actually dip lower than it could have been, since he's keeping his heifers to breed rather than sending them to the slaughterhouse.

This is the math that ranchers all over the U.S. are facing. At 44 Farms in Cameron, president Bob McClaren said he's seen other ranchers taking the chance to sell now, while prices for cattle are high, even at the detriment of the overall herd size. He's held back, but it hasn't been easy.

"We have had the good fortune to expand the number of head that we have, but that's come at a cost," McClaren said. "Because a lot of this beef would have been more profitable to sell than to keep."

High demand

At Truth BBQ, business used to depend on buying brisket cheap.

The cut takes hours of slow cooking to transform from tough to tender, shrinking all the while — a labor-intensive process that only made sense when the meat itself was relatively inexpensive.

Pit master Leonard Botello makes a barbecue plate at Merritt Meat Company on Friday, April 19, 2024, in Round Top .
Raquel Natalicchio/Staff photographer

But now, pitmaster Leonard Botello IV said he pays more than $6 per pound of raw brisket, up from $4 three years ago. Expenses for everything else, from vinegar to butcher paper, have risen too. Botello increased his prices from $27 or $28 for a pound of cooked brisket to $36 in response, but he feels like he's hit a limit. His bottom line is hurting.

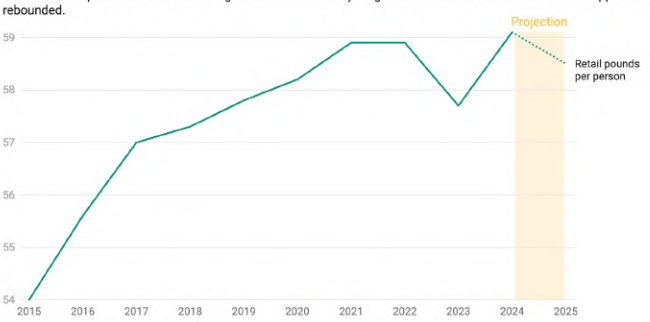
"Truth is kind of like my gift and my curse," Botello said. "Everybody wants me to cook brisket anytime that I go anywhere, and that's the most expensive thing for me to make."

He's squeezed between two opposing forces: a smaller beef supply and still-high demand.

Beef "disappearance" — the amount of beef consumed in the U.S. — largely dipped between 2006 and 2015, but has mostly risen since, according to USDA data. Though prices have jumped in recent years, consumption hasn't yet dropped to match. The USDA projected slightly lower rates of disappearance in the U.S. for this year compared to last, but only a drop of about 1%.

Beef consumption is projected to drop after years of mostly steady growth

The number of pounds of beef the average American eats in a year grew from 2015 to 2022. It has since dropped and rebounded.



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To Anderson, the A&M economist, this is the result of a long, slow cultural shift toward beef.

"We really see a decline in demand, starting in the '70s, with what I might call the diet health hypothesis: red meat and fats, bad for you," he said. "I think what we've seen is the pendulum swing back towards more natural, more things like beef."

Left: Ground beef from Brian Findeisen's Erbe Ranch Mercantile is shown Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025. Right: Doug Bass, owner, moves a cow and calf through the ring during the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction in Columbus Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.

Chris DuBois of the research firm Circana also noted higher interest in cooking at home, especially post-pandemic, and recognition of the rising quality of American beef as reasons for the strong interest in beef today.

Now, he said, customers prioritize buying beef, as long as they can squeeze it into their budgets.

"As long as people stay employed, in general, you're going to see people continue to buy beef," he predicted. "To me, I think all bets start coming off if you see another 1 percent rise in unemployment."

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But to local chef Austin Simmons, whose cooking goes heavy on beef, this whole system is unsatisfactory. He's sick of seeing restaurants struggle when cattle prices rise and ranchers struggle when they dip.

So he launched Chef & Rancher with rancher Larry Ludeke. When Simmons' new restaurant Charolais opens in The Woodlands next year, beef raised by Ludeke will go straight to Simmons, with no middlemen in between.

Austin Simmons, formerly of the restaurant Tris, shown Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019, in The Woodlands. Simmons has since started an endeavor called Chef & Rancher.
Nick de la Torre/Contributor

"We don't want the big packers controlling our destiny. We don't want their stock market prices saying that our animals are worth X today and X tomorrow. The hell with all of that," Simmons said. "We'll raise what we believe in, we'll serve what we believe in, and let the chefs go out and put it in a restaurant, and put the margin back into the cattle herd."

He's betting the model will prove more sustainable, though it's costly. "We've spent more money than I care to share," Simmons admitted. "Everybody needs to pony up."

Cattle are shown at the Cattleman's Columbus Livestock Auction in Columbus Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2025.
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

That means Simmons' system is unlikely to catch on widely, at least for now. For most beef eaters, the decade-long cycle of price spikes and dips will continue.

Even so, economist Anderson sees some reason for optimism. He believes the U.S. cattle supply is nearing its bottom and will start to rebound soon — a shift that could eventually cool the soaring grocery store prices.

"We're just not quite there yet," he said. "But I think we're pretty close."

Oct 16, 2025

Aviva Bechky
FOOD REPORTER

Aviva Bechky is a food reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

They have previously written for the San Francisco Chronicle, Seattle Times and the Oregonian. Their portfolio includes profiles, breaking restaurant news, and stories about dining trends and farming. Born in Washington, D.C., Bechky, a Trekkie whose favorite food is sour cabbage fish soup, loves to knit and read sci-fi in their spare time.

Aviva graduated from Northwestern University with a journalism degree.

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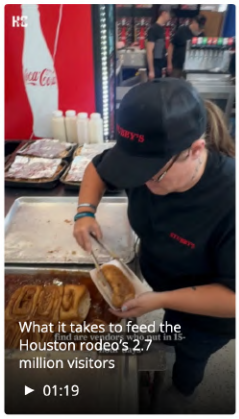

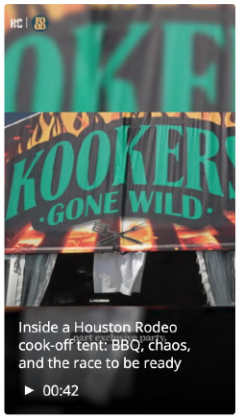

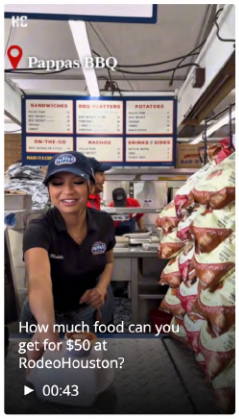

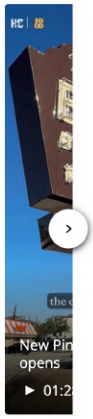

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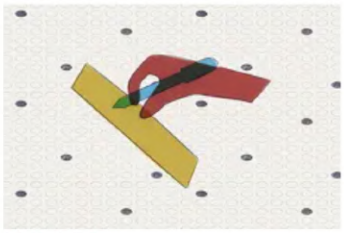

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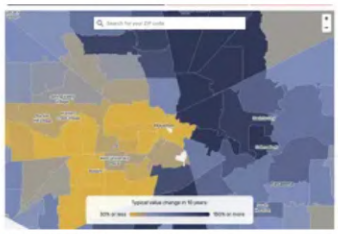

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