

## **Steaks and USDA Grading**

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Summer weekends are often a time to invite friends and family to a cookout where an individual can fire up the grill and prepare their favorite steaks. Often times, our guests may not have been as impressed with our grilling skills as we would like.

The challenge of being the neighborhood grill master is more than throwing a slab of meat on a wire grate. It takes an understanding of the different cuts of steak and the selection of the best quality.

Certain meat cuts are more conducive for grilling. The following steaks are appropriate for grilling listed in order beginning with the cuts that are the most tender: tenderloin (fillet mignon), rib-eye, rib, T-bone/porterhouse, strip, top sirloin, flatiron, chuck eye, and tip center. Less tender cuts, such as bottom round, round, and eye of round are not as grill-friendly.

Besides the type of cut, the quality of the meat chosen will greatly affect the final taste of the product. To assist in this process the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a quality label in its federal grading process to assist the consumer in choosing certain grades of meat to grill.

Historically, the grading of beef has been a voluntary service of the meat industry, except during World War II and the Korean Conflict. The first formal grading of beef occurred in the 1920's.

It was expanded with the Agricultural Act of 1946 which required the USDA to provide services to facilitate the marketing of agricultural products. Beef grading has been considered one of those services.

Today, beef grading is still voluntary, and the meat packing industry asks the USDA to perform the service. Meat processors pay the cost of training graders.

Inspectors follow detailed guidelines that consider many factors such as the amount of marbling (fat content, which adds taste and juiciness) and the age of the beef carcass (tenderness) to determine a specific grade quality.

There are eight quality levels of beef grading. The top three grades are USDA Prime, Choice, and Select.

The amount of USDA Prime beef is limited and generally bought by the upscale restaurant and gourmet industry. Supermarkets offer the next two quality grades to consumers.

The lower grades include Standard, Commercial, Utility, Cutter, and Canner. Standard and Commercial are often sold as ungraded or store brand beef products. Utility, Cutter,

and Canner grade beef may end up in products such as frozen pot pie dinners, microwave burritos, hamburgers and other processed food products.

For the backyard grill master, the best quality steaks available at the local supermarket are most likely USDA Choice steaks. A savvy shopper needs to be aware that supermarkets may use the terms prime and choice that are not USDA graded.

Look for the official USDA shield along with the words, Prime, Choice, or Select. Also, do not be confused by the quality grade USDA Prime and prime rib. Prime rib is a cut of meat, not a quality grade.

CAB beef is not a USDA quality grade. CAB stands for certified angus beef and is a branding name used as a marketing tool.

For the health conscious, USDA Choice and Select grades will have less fat but still adequate taste for most individuals. USDA Prime may have the best taste but it will also have the largest level of fat content.

As we all adjust to the summer heat and fire up our grills, pay attention to the store labels as you buy your steaks. Starting with a good quality steak and selecting the right cut of meat is a big part of impressing family and friends with your cooking magic.