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Figuring out the names and grades for beef products

Beef is marketed under enough different labels, names, and grades to be a complete puzzle to the average consumer. Some have specific meanings; others can vary depending on how the producer defines them.

Labels

"Normal" beef: What you would typically find in the supermarket or at the local drive-thru. Most U.S. cattle are fed grain or corn, and produced for higher fat content. There are no specific restrictions on the use of either genetically-enhanced feed or antibiotics to treat the cattle.

Organic beef: Refers to the quality of the feed given to the cattle, which must be produced from organic sources. Does not specify the type of feed. Hormones and antibiotics are prohibited. Cattle must be slaughtered at an organic facility. Of all labels, this is the only one with a national set of standards.

Natural beef: By USDA labeling standards, must not contain any artificial ingredients. Does not address use of natural hormones or drugs. In the industry, tends to refer to pasture-raised beef that has received minimal medication. Feed may not necessarily be organic.

Grass-fed beef: Cattle are given grass or silage to eat, not grain or corn. Does not specify the preparation of the grass or the use of drugs or hormones. Does not specify the feeding method, so some grass-fed beef are raised in pens.

Free-range beef: Cattle are allowed to forage for food, usually over open grasslands. Different from "pasture-finished" cattle, which generally begin in pens and often eat grain before being transferred to the open range.

Lean beef: Refers to the fat content, not the grazing method. Focus is on a lower fat beef, with less marbling of fat in the meat. Usually does not apply USDA grades, which promote a higher fat content. Cattle are usually grass fed, but no single standard exists.

USDA Grades*

Prime: Has a high degree of marbling, which allows it to be cooked with minimal preparation. Usually marketed as the top quality of beef. Sample fat content: 23.3g per 100g.

Choice: High quality, though with less marbling. Also cooks easily, but some cuts may require more preparation. Sample fat content: 20.6g per 100g.

Select: Less marbling than the others means this is the leanest cut of beef. Still tender, but may require more preparation because of the lower fat content. Sample fat content: 17.4g per 100g.

USDA also has Standard and Commercial grades, which are often sold ungraded as generic whole meat. USDA also grades beef on yield – how much edible meat is on a carcass.

Determining grade: The USDA beef grades seen in supermarkets actually refer to the amount of fat in the product, though the USDA describes it as a description of "tenderness, juiciness, and flavor." "Marbled" fat refers to the level of fat distributed throughout the "lean," or edible meat portion of the beef.

Source: MSNBC research, USDA.

* Fat content based on composite cuts, raw, trimmed to 1/4" fat.