

Making the Grade

I often ask restaurant owners and operators two simple questions: Is all beef inspected? Answer – Yes. Is all beef graded? Answer – No. Surprisingly, most cannot answer these questions correctly. Most of you might already buy graded product and I'd like to explain what the difference is.

Inspection:

Since 1906, all meat processed and sold within the United States is inspected by the USDA. Inspection is mandatory. When cattle passes inspection the product is deemed wholesome, nutritious and safe to eat. At this point, the product is given an EST. code number for tracking. These EST numbers can be found on every piece for boxed beef and ground beef. The inspection process indicates nothing about the overall quality of the product.

Grade:

Unlike inspection, USDA grading is voluntary. In fact, an extra cost is added to have a carcass graded. Why pay extra to have your cattle graded? Because they can fetch a higher price on the open market if they grade out at certain levels. Most grading is done by the eyesight of a USDA grader on site, though some of this process has become computerized. The grader is looking for a certain amount of "intramuscular fat" or marbling. The level of marbling translates with "standards" (which are written descriptions) of quality and cutability. In this case, fat equals flavor and helps determine tenderness. Since the grades are standards held by the USDA and the USDA is not affiliated with any meat producers, the resulting grade is independent from the producer.

In other words, if you buy USDA Prime grade ribeye from one producer it should perform the same as any other packers Prime grade product.

The three most common grades used in foodservice are Prime, Choice and Select (in descending order). A fourth commonly sold class is "No Roll" (notated N/R). A No Roll product is non-graded. It gets its name because when a USDA grader grades a carcass they indicate that grade using a blue (eatable) ink roller on the back side of the carcass. A non-graded product doesn't get ink rolled hence "No Roll." Just because a product is not graded does not always mean the cattle is less quality than a Select. In fact, inside of a box of N/R beef a customer may have product that could have graded as Select or higher. Why would a producer not grade their cattle? It costs money and there is a market for no roll meat. If a producer knows that a particular lot is going to grade low they might save the money and sell it as no roll.

Ultimately, each operator/owner needs to establish what is most important for their needs. Whether you buy Select, Choice or Prime grade, when you buy graded beef you're going to get consistency every time you open the box.

Aaron Scholl

Center of the Plate Buyer/Beef Specialist

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