



Demystifying Food Labels: Labels for Specific Meat Products

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Labels Inform Consumers

Labels serve to inform consumers about quality information and product differentiation. Differentiation is the act of producing or altering a homogeneous product in a way to distinguish it from substitute products. Similarly, information related to the quality of the item signifies to consumers that certain food products may have a better taste and/or texture. The goal of product differentiation is to appeal to specific consumers' wants and needs, and therefore increase the profit margin of the product. The group of labels presented in this publication are specific to types of meat (beef, poultry, and lamb) targeted at different market segments among consumers.

Labels Found on Specific Meat Products

Each of the following infographics are available on the Virginia Cooperative Extension Food as a Business portal (click the "Media" tab).

General Beef Labels

Cattle raised for beef go through several

"phases" in the production process. This phasing in the cattle production process is not inherent to other production animal process as the biological process is much longer for cattle. Because of this longer process, cattle producers have an opportunity to add value to their beef products at multiple points along the production process.

Understanding Common Beef Labels

cow/calf phase backgrounding phase finishing phase

Cattle that are meant to be market animals are put on pasture after they are weaned.

Before slaughter, most producers incorporate grain into the animal's diet to put weight on the animal.

However, farmers ultimately have a choice when it comes to what they feed and how they finish their cattle before they go to market.

Some producers choose to forgo finishing their cattle on grain and keep the animal on pasture before they head to market.

This led to private labels distinguishing between 'grain finished' & 'grass finished' beef.

however...
The 'grass finished' label does not necessarily mean the same thing as the 'grass-fed' label.

'Grass-fed' implies
• the animal had access to pasture year round
• the animals were not grain-fed at any point

The 'grass-fed' beef label gave rise to the 'vegetarian-fed' beef label.

People often associate 'vegetarian-fed' with no animal by-products being used in feed rations.

However, animal by-products are RARELY used in the beef industry. Producers usually use the 'vegetarian-fed' label as a way to rebrand themselves. 'Vegetarian-fed' is simply another term for 'grain-finished'.

The 'grass-fed' label is intended for small producers marketing < 49 cattle a year.

The label 'farm raised' just implies the meat was produced on a small scale operation.

All of these labels are private & unregulated. This has led to confusion among beef labels in the market today.

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Within the finishing phase of the production process, cattle are fed grain or grass. Typically, these finishing process are differentiated with a "Grass finished" label. In recent years, a "Vegetarian fed" label has been used to add

marketing value to beef from grain finished cattle. However, “Grass finished” is different from a “grass-fed” label, as the grass fed implies that cattle are not fed grain at any point in the production process. The “grass fed” label is intended for small producers marketing less than 49 head of cattle a year. Similarly, “farm raised” labels imply that the cattle were raised on small scale operations. All of these label claims are private and unregulated, so consumers should do their research on individual firms to determine whether the label claims are true.

Beef Quality Labels

[Beef quality labels](#) referred to as grading standards are set forth by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Quality grading in beef products is based on marbling of the meat. Marbling describes how fat is interspersed with lean meat. The amount and dispersal of marbling determines the grade of the beef. The highest quality graded beef is labeled as Prime and has abundant to slightly abundant marbling. Prime grade beef commands a very high price premium. The second highest quality grade is Choice. Choice graded meat is still considered of high quality but has only a small amount of marbling and much less marbling than Prime. The lowest quality grade is labeled as Select. Select grade beef is lean and tender, but lacks the marbling of the higher

quality grades. All quality grades are used to inform consumers that a piece of beef is better tasting.

Producers who aim for more marbling in their beef products have an opportunity to increase profits.

Certified Angus Beef



DO YOU KNOW YOUR BEEF?
Understanding USDA beef quality grade standards

marbling
the amount of fat interspersed with lean meat

PRIME SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT MARBLING PRESENT
Produced from young, well-fed beef cattle.

USDA PRIME

CHOICE SMALL AMOUNT OF MARBLING PRESENT
High quality, but less marbling than prime.

USDA CHOICE

SELECT SLIGHT AMOUNT OF MARBLING PRESENT
Lean and tender, but lacks juiciness and flavor due to lesser marbling.

USDA SELECT

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Certified Angus Beef

(CAB) is a label certified by the

American Angus Association® since 1978. CAB is advertised as “always tasty, tender, and juicy.” CAB aims to signify increased quality over other beef products and has gained in popularity over the past four decades. The CAB label is commonly used in grocery stores and many restaurants. For Beef to be Certified Angus, the cattle producer must prove Angus breed lineage through either physical or genetic qualifications. A DNA test or provable

CERTIFIED angus BEEF

GENETIC QUALIFICATIONS

- 1 Positive Identification
- 2 Provable Angus Parentage

PHYSICAL QUALIFICATIONS

- 1 Main body must be black
- 2 No color behind the shoulder, above the flanks, or breaking the midline behind the shoulder
- 3 Can be either horned or polled

did you know?

There are two different methods that can be used to apply for membership in a certified Angus program.

One method is based on the genetics, or the genetic makeup of the animal.

The other method is based on the phenotype, or the outward appearance of the animal.

Angus parent lines can suffice for genetic qualifications. The physical or outward appearance of qualifications include the following: main body being black in color; no other color behind the shoulders, above the flanks, or breaking the midline behind the shoulder; and the cow may be horned or polled (no horns).

Country of Origin Label

Country of Origin Labeling, often known as [COOL](#), is a labeling law that was implemented to notify consumers about the source (country of production) of certain meat products.

While all imported meat must meet USDA and FDA food safety standards, consumers advocated for more transparency within the food chain. COOL was originally required for beef, lamb, goat, and chicken. However, beef was later removed from this requirement due to extraneous costs on cattle producers.



Poultry Labels

There are several labels that are common on poultry products you find in the grocery store.

Some labels are about storage of the meat and others are about production process.

Poultry with the “Fresh” label is meat that has never been stored below 26°F. All “Fresh” labelled poultry must also be accompanied a ‘keep refrigerated’ statement. On the other hand, “Frozen” poultry is raw meat that are stored at a temperature at or below 0°F.

“Free Range” poultry refers to how the birds were raised. Specifically, the birds must have been allowed access to the outdoors. “Free Range” poultry does not necessarily imply that the meat is organic, but all organic poultry is by definition “Free Range.”

Lamb Standards Labels

Like beef quality labels, lamb meat also has quality grades. [Lamb has four USDA quality grades](#), two of which are not usually labeled or found in grocery stores. “Prime” grade lamb is thickly muscled, moderately wide and thick in relation to their length, and possess moderately thick and full legs, back, and shoulders.

“Choice” grade lamb is only slightly thick in all the aforementioned areas. Both of these meat grades are found in butcher shops and grocery stores.

USDA lamb grading standards		GOOD	UTILITY
PRIME	CHOICE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slightly thin muscled throughout Moderately narrow in relation to their length Slightly thin and narrow legs, back, and shoulders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carcass is inferior to standards specified for the Good grade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thickly muscled throughout Moderately wide and thick in relation to their length Moderately thick and full legs, back, and shoulders 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slightly thick muscled throughout Slightly wide and thick in relation to their length Slightly thick and full legs, back, and shoulders. 	

not usually labeled in supermarkets

The lower two grades of lamb are “Good” and “Utility.” “Good” grade lamb is slightly thin muscled, moderately narrow in the relation to their length, and slightly thin and narrow in the legs, back, and shoulders. “Utility” grade lamb is only defined as inferior to the standards specified for the “Good” grade.

Acknowledgements

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More Resources

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). “A Guide to Federal Food Labeling Requirements for Meat, Poultry, and Egg Products.” Available online at:

https://www.fsis.usda.gov/shared/PDF/Labeling_Requirements_Guide.pdf

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