

BUYING BEEF FOR THE HOME

Supplemental Information to Fact Sheet AFS-3401

Introduction

As consumers seemingly shift the way they purchase meat, one observation is an increase in the direct marketing of beef from the livestock producer to the consumer. The successful relationship between a producer and a consumer requires the important input of a highly skilled middle-person – the meat processor. And often, it is the success or failure of the working relationship between the meat processor and the customer/consumer that will determine the ultimate level of satisfaction for all parties involved.

Converting one animal unit (a beef steer for example) into something useful and nutritious for our health is a complicated process that requires a strong understanding of the finished product(s). There are easily more than 60 different possible beef cuts, which can be gleaned from a beef carcass, and frustration can occur when one does not fully understand that not all cuts can be produced from one carcass. Frustration and confusion can be greatly reduced by effective communication and education.

What should the processor deliver to the consumer?

- A clear understanding of the slaughter/processing schedule.
- A schedule or a list of available or unavailable cuts based on their processing practices and or skills.
- A willingness and forward effort to help the customer/consumer understand the complexity of the meat products available from a side or quarter of beef.
- An explanation of how non-anatomical specific cuts might be generated and the reasoning/logic of the decision (e.g. – stew meat, kabobs, cubed steak, ground beef, etc.)

- How long the carcass will be aged and what the typical cooler shrink and/or cut yield might be.
- Information on how the product will be packaged and labeled and handled.
- A clear understanding of how processing and storage fees are assessed and calculated.
- A clean, safe product that represents the processors' skills and performance.

What Should the Consumer Deliver to the Processor?

1. A knowledgeable description of the cuts desired and any packaging preferences, which are mutually agreeable between the consumer and the processor (e.g. – number of cuts per package, size/weight of ground beef packages, etc.)
2. A commitment to retrieve the product based on an already established agreement.
3. A valid and legitimate payment for the product/services. No bouncing checks.

This criteria can be influenced by the inputs or limitations of a third entity (livestock producer/seller) if the consuming customer is purchasing the product from the livestock producer. For example, the producer and the processor may have an established agreement that defines much of the available cuts or the processing criteria, and the consumer may not have influence on those decisions. The consumer must choose to purchase or not purchase based on their acceptance or rejection of those criteria.



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Where's the beef I want?

When converting a side of beef into individual cuts, the list of possible cuts is enormous. This can overwhelm consumers who may not have past experiences with understanding the available cuts. One classic example of consumer confusion is when a consumer desires to have both T-Bone steaks and boneless strip steaks produced from one side of beef. While it is physically possible to accomplish this array, most processors will elect to not follow this path because it is inefficient and time-consuming to a detriment. The processor will force the consumer to choose one or the other. Another avenue that produces frustration is when assumptions are made about the bone status of certain cuts. The use of terminology can lead to frustration. For example, many meat processing experts of the world will tell you rib steaks are bone-in and ribeye steaks are boneless. Some consumers may not fully understand simple differences like this. Furthermore, not all roasts are created equally (e.g. bone-in versus boneless). And to complicate matters further, animal and carcass sizes have a direct impact on portion size of cuts. A steak that is cut 1-1/2 inches thick sounds great to some, unless it comes from what is known as a heavy-weight carcass; a carcass which might weigh in excess of 1,000 pounds. That could be a large steak. Roast shapes/sizes also are impacted by carcass size and fabrication practices. Finally, if a consumer purchases an anatomical quarter of beef, then some cuts will not be available. For example, arm roasts are not available from hindquarters. Yet, some progressive processors have marketed an “assembled quarter of beef,” which is an assembly of multiple cuts to a total weight that represents approximately one-quarter the weight of the yield from a whole carcass.

Ground Beef

When having sides or quarters processed into individual cuts, ground beef is a natural output of the process. The leanness of the ground beef (lean:fat ratio) can be a source of confusion and frustration. Most processors of carcass beef (for individuals) do not have the ability to accurately measure the chemical lean content in the ground beef produced, nor do they have the incentive to do so. It is advisable the processor and the customer reach an understanding of how ground beef is manufactured and what constitutes descriptions like “lean” or “regular,” etc.

Generally speaking, if ground beef is produced from the various primal portions of the carcass, the following primals will produce trimmings of the leanest to fattest composition, in descending order:

Round--Chuck--Loin--Rib--Brisket--Flank--Plate. This order may change slightly if the entire muscle cuts are ground versus only the trimmings produced from individual cut fabrication.

Summary

Purchasing beef in carcass, side or quarter formats can be rewarding and satisfying for many parties. A successful transaction requires effective communication and an understanding of each other's understanding among all parties.

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