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Understanding beef quality grades

When it comes to beef, consumers have numerous choices, ranging from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grades to premium brands such as the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand. Retailers and restaurants often tout these labels on menus and in grocery aisles, but often, consumers don't know where to start. Thanks to the USDA, beef quality is as simple as a grade.

What's in a grade?

The USDA inspects all U.S. beef for wholesomeness, and most beef is graded for additional quality standards. USDA grading is a voluntary process that categorizes beef, predicts its quality and helps the industry and consumers determine its value.

When it comes to quality grades, the main difference lies in the amount of marbling within the meat. Typically, more marbling equals a higher USDA grade. Marbling, or the tiny white flecks scattered throughout the lean red meat, gives beef its great taste and keeps it tender and juicy while cooking. Beef with higher degrees of marbling usually earns a better quality grade.

Prime, Choice, and Select

While there are eight grades given by the USDA, consumers are most familiar with the top three:

- **Prime:** The best grade given by the USDA, it represents the highest degree of marbling and an elite product. Less than 3% of beef qualifies as USDA Prime, providing a limited supply for consumers to enjoy. It is most often found in high-end steakhouses touting exclusive, high-quality beef.
- **Choice:** The grade commonly advertised by retailers and restaurants. Within the Choice grade, there are extreme variations in the amount of marbling. Some Choice beef has less marbling and is similar to Select, while the top levels of Choice beef have ample marbling that are much closer to Prime.
- **Select:** This grade has limited marbling and is often less tender than Choice and Prime grades. It is widely available to consumers and tends to be featured mainly by retailers.

Where does the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand fit?

In addition to a USDA grade, beef may also be evaluated to determine whether it meets the brand's specifications. The *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand pioneered the concept of branded premium beef more than 30 years ago, and today it relies on 10 stringent quality specifications that are upheld by the USDA.

Independent USDA graders evaluate beef to ensure it meets the brand's standards before earning the name. **Only the top tier of Choice beef, and Prime, can meet the brand's strict standards.** Qualifying beef must also meet additional specifications that address tenderness, appealing appearance, and uniform and consistent product size.

In addition, consumers seeking the best of the best look for *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand Prime – a distinction given to beef that meets USDA Prime requirements plus all of the brand's additional standards. ***Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand Prime is truly elite: less than 1.5% of beef qualifies.**

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