Selecting a steak for the grill

Weather has been a major problem for all areas of agriculture. For the beef industry, it has been a shortage of forages caused by wildfires, severe winter kill of alfalfa and a prolonged wet spring preventing forage harvest.

In addition, the beef industry has been attacked by some environmental groups, which complain of increased greenhouse gases from burping cows and push for meatless Mondays to diminish their impact.

But scientific studies have shown the contribution of cattle to greenhouse gases is very small compared to the transportation and energy sectors.

Vegan extremists and animal activists continue their attack to eliminate the beef industry. Plant-based and laboratory stem cell protein sources claim they will eventually replace animal beef.

However, the current demand for beef products is high and cattle producers continue to meet that demand with quality products.

Demand for beef is always high during the summer when backyard grilling is in full swing. In addition, many grill masters will be at work on the Fourth of July, feeding friends and family. Many hamburgers will be cooked, but the top grillers will provide steaks for their guests.

The challenge of being the neighborhood grill master is more than throwing a slab of meat on a wire grate. It takes an understanding of the different cuts of steak and the selection of the best quality.

Certain meat cuts are more conducive for grilling. The following steaks are appropriate for grilling, listed in order, beginning with the cuts that are most tender: tenderloin (filet mignon), rib-eye, rib, T-boneporterhouse, strip, top sirloin, flatiron, chuck eye, and tip center.

Less tender cuts, such as bottom round, round, and eye of round are not as grill-friendly.

Besides the type of cut, the quality of the meat chosen will greatly affect the final taste of the product. To assist in this process the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a quality label in its federal grading process to assist the consumer in choosing certain grades of meat to grill.

The first formal grading of beef occurred in the 1920s. Historically, the grading of beef has been a voluntary service of the meat industry, except during World War II and the Korean conflict.

The government became more involved with the Agricultural Act of 1946, which required the USDA to provide services to facilitate the marketing of agricultural products. Beef grading was one of the services that resulted from this legislation.

Today, beef grading is still voluntary, and the meat packing industry asks the USDA to perform the service. Meat processors pay the cost of training graders.

Inspectors follow detailed guidelines that consider many factors such as the amount of marbling (fat content, which adds taste and juiciness) and the age of the beef carcass (tendereness) to determine a specific grade quality.

There are eight quality levels of beef grading. The top three grades are USDA Prime, Choice, and Select.

The amount of USDA Prime beef is limited and generally bought by the upscale restaurant and gourmet industry.

Supermarkets offer the next two quality grades to consumers. However, I have seen USDA Prime steaks for sale at Costco.

The lower grades include Standard, Commercial, Utility, Cutter and Canner. Standard and Commercial are often sold as ungraded or store brand beef products.

Utility, Cutter, and Canner grade beef may end up in products such as frozen pot pie dinners, microwave burritos, hamburgers and other processed food products.

For the backyard grill master, the best quality steaks available at the local supermarket are most likely USDA Choice steaks. A savvy shopper needs to know that supermarkets may use the terms prime and choice for cuts that are not USDA graded.

Look for the official USDA shield along with the words Prime, Choice or Select.

Also, do not confuse the quality grade USDA Prime with prime rib. Prime rib is a cut of meat, not a quality grade.

CAB beef is not a USDA quality grade. CAB stands for Certified Angus Beef and is a branding name used by the marketing board of Angus producers.

Producers raising Herefords and other beef breeds would argue that their beef is as good or better than Angus.

For the health-conscious, USDA Choice and Select grades will have less fat but still adequate taste for most individuals. USDA Prime may have the best taste but it will also have the largest level of fat content.

As we all adjust to the summer heat and fire up our grills, pay attention to store labels as you buy your steaks. Starting with a good quality steak and selecting the right cut of meat is a big part of impressing family and friends with your cooking magic.

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