## **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.

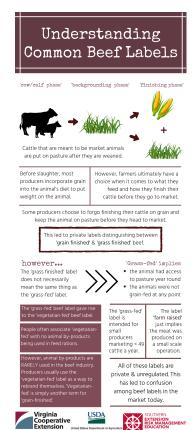
#### **Labels Found on Specific Meat Products**

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.



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



Certified Angus Beef
(CAB) is a label

beef quality grade standards

(CAB) is a label certified by the

PRIME

CHOICE

SELECT

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

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.

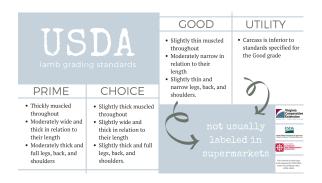
Some labels are about storage of the meat and others are about production process.

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.



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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# https://www.fsis.usda.gov/shared/PDF/Labeling\_Requirements\_Guide.pdf

United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS). "Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms." Available online at:

https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets/food-labeling/meat-and-poultry-labeling-terms/meat-and-poultry-labeling-terms

United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA-AMS). "Country of Origin Labeling (COOL)." Available online at: <a href="https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/cool">https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/cool</a>

United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS). "Statements that Bioengineered or Genetically Modified Ingredients or Animal Feed were not used in Meat, Poultry, or Egg Products." Available online at:

https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/regulatory-compliance/labeling/claims-guidance/procedures-nongenetically-engineered-statement

Certified Angus Beef Brand. "Frequently Asked Questions." Available online at: <a href="https://www.certifiedangusbeef.com/faq.php">https://www.certifiedangusbeef.com/faq.php</a>

United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA-AMS). "Live Animal Specification. American Angus Association's Specification for Characteristics of Cattle Eligible for Approved Beef Programs Claiming Angus Influence." Available online at:

https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/AAALiveAnimalSpecification.pdf

United States Department of Health and Human Services. "Keep Food Safe: By Types of Food." Available online at: https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/types/meat/index.html

#### **More Resources**

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

