



Demystifying Food Labels for Meat and Poultry Products Part II: Labels for Specific Products

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Labels Inform Consumers

Labels on food products can inform consumers about quality information and product differentiation, in other words, what features, or attributes distinguish it from similar products. Sometimes labels can signal to consumers that the products on which they appear have a different taste or texture than other similar products. Other times, labels reflect information about how the product was produced, which may not affect the taste or texture.

Producers can use product differentiation and communicate information about food quality or attributes to consumers using labels. This publication and an accompanying publication provide information to help consumers understand and interpret labels on meat and poultry products, and help producers understand how they may use labels to differentiate their products and increase their profit margins.

“Demystifying Food Labels for Meat and Poultry Products Part I: Overview” (VCE publication AAEC-229NP) provides basic information about meat and poultry labels and examples of labels that may be found on multiple different categories of products. The labels discussed in this publication are specific to certain types of meat (beef and lamb) and poultry.

Labels Found on Specific Meat Products

Beef Labels

Labels Indicating the Diet of Beef Cattle

Cattle raised for beef go through several phases or stages in the production process, as calves take longer to grow to full size than some other animals (Farm Credit of the Virginias, 2022). The first stage is the cow-calf segment, during which calves drink their mother’s milk and graze on pasture. The second stage, after weaning, is the backgrounding or stocker phase, during which calves continue to graze on pasture and may receive supplemental feed. During the final stage, finishing, cattle may remain pastured or may be moved to feedlots to be fed grain. Throughout a beef cow’s or steer’s life, producers can add value to their beef products by making choices about the location and feed on which the animal is being raised.

Within the finishing phase of the production process, cattle are fed grass or roughage and grain (Farm Credit of the Virginias, 2022). Typically, beef from cattle that have been finished with grass is differentiated with a “Grass finished” label. However, beef from cattle that were fed grains earlier in their lives may have been finished on grass (USDA FSIS, 2019).

In contrast, the “100% grass fed” label indicates that animals were never confined in a feedlot and were never fed grains (USDA FSIS, 2019). 100% grass fed beef may come from animals whose forage-

based diets also included hay, silage, and other roughage sources, and vitamin and mineral supplements. (See Figure 1 for a summary.)

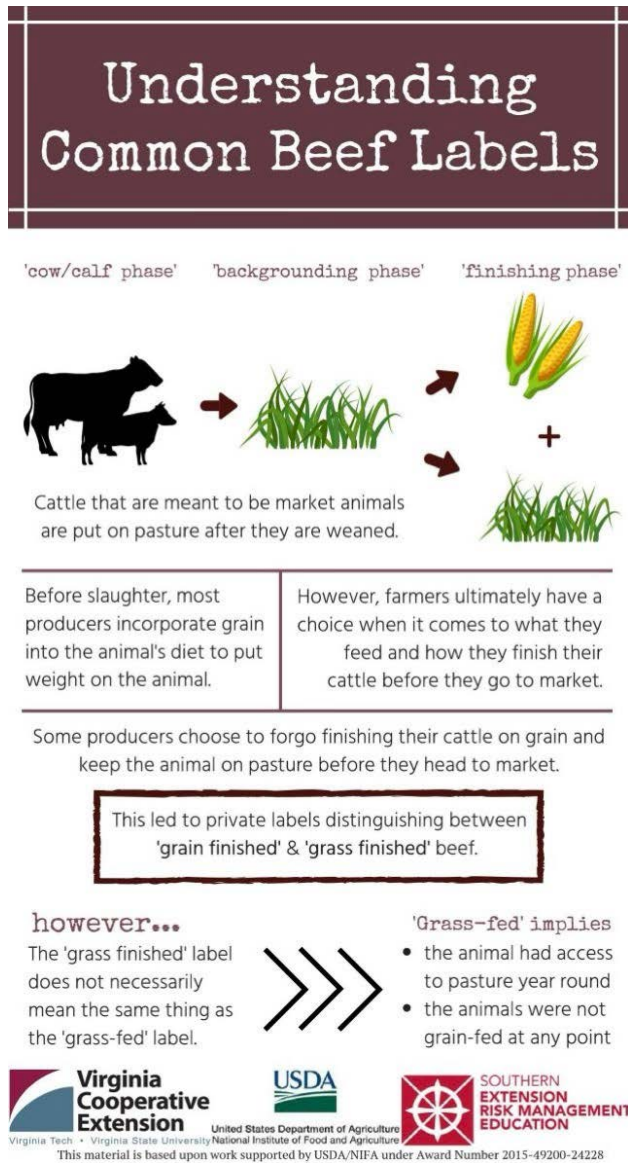


Figure 1: Common Beef Labels

Beef Quality Labels

Beef quality, or grading standards, labels are regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). Grading standards in beef products are based on the marbling of the meat (USDA AMS, “Beef Grading Shields”). (See Figure 2.) Marbling describes how fat is interspersed with lean meat. The amount and dispersal of marbling determines the grade of the beef.

The highest quality grade for beef is Prime, which has abundant to slightly abundant marbling (USDA AMS, “Beef Grading Shields”). Prime grade beef usually commands a very high price premium. The second-highest quality grade is Choice. Choice grade meat is still considered of high quality but has only a small amount of marbling and much less marbling than Prime. The third-highest quality grade is Select. Select grade beef is lean and tender but only has slight marbling. Several other grades of beef are issued by AMS, but these grades rarely appear on product labels. Producers whose beef has more marbling may receive a higher price for their products.

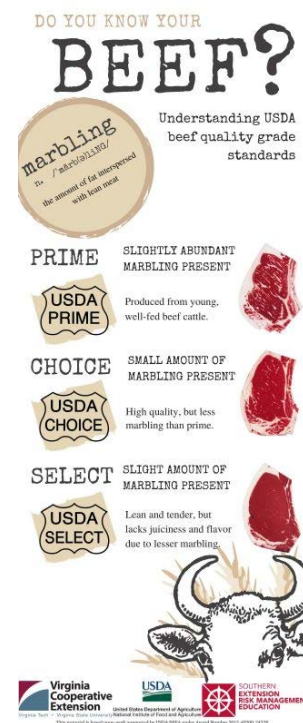


Figure 2: Beef Quality Labels

Certified Angus Beef®

Certified Angus Beef® (CAB) is a label developed by the American Angus Association®. Beef bearing this label has been evaluated for compliance with the standard by the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service and USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA AMS, 2022). The CAB label is commonly used in grocery stores and many restaurants. To receive the CAB label, 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 qualifications related to physical or outward appearance 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. (See Figure 3 for a summary.)



Figure 3: Certified Angus Beef

Climate-Smart or Climate-Friendly Beef

Climate-friendly labels on beef have recently been developed by at least one producer and approved by USDA FSIS (Environmental Working Group, 2024). Researchers from Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, and West Virginia University are working with beef producers in West Virginia and the Appalachian region of Virginia to implement climate-smart agricultural practices and help farmers market their beef as climate smart. For more information about this program, please visit the Grazing for Appalachian Sustainability website: <https://extension.wvu.edu/agriculture/pasture-hay-forage/grazing-for-appalachian-sustainability>.

Poultry Labels

Fresh Poultry Label

Poultry can only be labeled as “fresh” if it has never been below 26°F (the temperature at which meat freezes) (USDA FSIS, undated). (See Figure 4.)



Figure 4: Fresh Poultry Label

Free Range Poultry Label

“Free Range” labels on poultry products indicate that the birds must have had continuous access to the outdoors throughout their normal growing cycle, even in winter in northern climates (USDA FSIS, 2019). “Free Range” poultry does not necessarily imply that the meat is organic, but all organic poultry is by definition “Free Range.” (See Figure 5.)



Figure 5: Free Range Poultry Label

Lamb Labels

Like beef quality labels, lamb meat also has quality grades. Lamb has several USDA quality grades, some of which are not usually labeled or found in grocery stores. “Prime” grade lamb is thickly muscled, moderately wide, and thick in relation to its length, with moderately sized legs, back, and shoulders (USDA AMS, “Lamb Grades and

Standards”). “Choice” grade lamb is only slightly sized in all the aforementioned areas. About 80 percent of the U.S. lamb supply is either Prime or Choice (USDA FSIS, 2024). (See Figure 6 for a summary.)



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. 	 <p>not usually labeled in supermarkets</p>	
		<small>This material is based on work supported by USDA-NRCS under Award Number NR233A750004G106.</small>	

Figure 6: Lamb Grades

The next two grades of lamb are “Good” and “Utility” (USDA AMS, “Lamb Grades and Standards”). “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.

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