

Small Plant NEWS

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Small Plant NEWS

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Interested in Grading? Here are the Basics

By *Linda Singletary*

The inspection and grading of meat and poultry are two separate programs within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is responsible for ensuring that the Nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged. As you know, this is mandatory and it's paid for from tax revenue. On the other hand, grading for quality is voluntary, and this service, should you request it, would be paid for by your company.

After your meat or poultry products are inspected for wholesomeness, you may request to have them graded for quality by a licensed Federal grader. The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is the agency responsible for grading meat and poultry. Grading for quality means the evaluation of traits related to the tenderness, juiciness, and flavor of meat; and for poultry, a normal shape that is fully fleshed, meaty, and free of defects.

USDA grades are based on nationally uniform Federal standards of quality. No matter where or when a consumer purchases graded meat or poultry, it must have met the same grade criteria.

The grade is stamped on the carcass or a side of beef and is usually not visible on retail cuts. However, retail

packages of beef, as well as poultry, will show the U.S. grade mark if they have been officially graded.



Beef

Beef is graded as whole carcasses in two ways – **quality** or **yield** grades. Quality grades are for tenderness, juiciness, and flavor. There are eight grades for beef, which are based on the amount of marbling (flecks of fat within the lean), color, and maturity.

The top three quality grades are **prime**, **choice**, and **select**.

- **Prime grade** is produced from young, well-fed beef cattle. It has abundant marbling and is generally sold in restaurants and hotels.

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- **Choice grade** is high quality, but has less marbling than Prime. Choice roasts and steaks from the loin and rib will be very tender, juicy, and flavorful and are, like Prime, suited to dry heat cooking.



- **Select grade** is very uniform in quality and normally leaner than the higher grades. It is fairly tender, but because it has less marbling, it may lack some of the juiciness and flavor of the higher grades.



The next two quality grades are standard and commercial. Products with these grades are frequently sold as ungraded or as “store brand” meat.

The final three quality grades are utility, cutter, and canner. These grades are seldom used and are sold either as ungraded or used to make ground beef and processed products.

The other method in which to grade a whole beef carcass is by using yield grades, which measure the amount of useable lean meat on the carcass. Yield grades range from “1” to “5,” with “1” being the highest and denoting the greatest ratio of lean to fat (grade “5” is the lowest yield ration). “Yield grade is most useful when you’re purchasing a side of carcass of beef for the freezer,” said Willard Goad, Customer Service Director of AMS’ Livestock and Seed Program, Meat Grading and Certification Branch.

Veal/Calf

For veal or calf, there are five selections used to measure the quality of the meat – **prime, choice, good, standard,** and **utility**. **Prime** and **choice** grades are juicier and more flavorful than the lower grades. Because of the young age of the animals, the meat will be a light grayish-pink to light pink, fairly firm, and velvety. The bones are small, soft, and quite red.

Lamb

There are five grades for lamb, which is produced from animals less than a year old. “Normally, only two grades are found at the retail level – **prime** and **choice**,” said Goad.

- **Prime** grade for lamb is very high in tenderness, juiciness, and flavor.
- **Choice** grade has slightly less marbling than prime, but still is very high quality.
- Lower grades of lamb and mutton (meat from older sheep) – **good, utility,** and **cull** – are seldom marked with the grade.

Pork

AMS has grades for pork carcasses (barrows, gilts, and sows). They are U.S. No. 1, U.S. No. 2, U.S. No. 3, U.S. No. 4, and U.S. Utility. Pork is usually not graded, as it is generally produced from young animals that have been bred and fed to produce more uniformly tender meat.

Appearance is an important guide in buying fresh pork. For best flavor and tenderness, meat should have a small amount of marbling.

Poultry

The kinds of poultry eligible for grading include, but are not limited to, chicken, turkeys, ducks, geese, pigeons, and guineas.

The U.S. grade shield for poultry may be found on the following poultry products: whole carcasses and parts, as well as roasts, tenderloins, and other boneless and/or skinless poultry products that are being marketed. “There are no grade standards for necks, wing tips, tails, giblets, or

Food Safety Resources

By Sally Fernandez

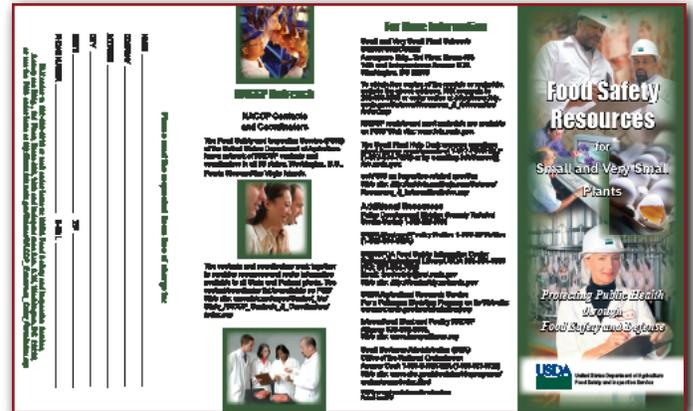
F SIS has updated its *Food Safety Resources* brochure. New publications on the revised brochure include *Food Defense Plan: Security Measures for Food Defense* and the *Guide to Designing a Small Red Meat Plant*. In addition, the brochure lists a new DVD, *FSIS Industry Podcasts, 2009*.

FSIS' Office of Outreach, Employee Education, and Training mailed the *Food Safety Resources* brochure to all establishments. However, if you did not receive a copy, please call the Small Plant Help Desk at (877) 374-7435.

You can also order materials for small and very small plants from FSIS' Web site at http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Science/HACCP_Resources_Order_Form/index.asp. If

you fill out the online form, remember to click on the "Submit" button at the bottom of the form.

Our resources are free of charge.



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ground poultry," said Charles Johnson, Chief of the Grading Branch in AMS' poultry program.

USDA grades for poultry are **A**, **B**, and **C**.

- **Grade A** is the highest quality and the only grade that is likely to be seen at the retail level. This grade indicates that the poultry products are virtually free from defects such as bruises, discolorations, and feathers.
- **Grades B** and **C** are usually used in further processed products where the poultry meat is cut up, chopped, or ground. "If these types of products are sold at retail, they are usually not grade identified," added Johnson.

One of the primary benefits of grading is the value added to the product. Meat and poultry grade standards are used by the industry to facilitate the marketing of meat and poultry products. They also serve to guide consumers about the distinguishing characteristics of high quality meat and poultry. Nationwide, it usually costs less than a penny per pound of product for grading services.

Deciding whether to have your meat or poultry products graded for quality is a business decision you can make depending on the market you're serving. Hopefully, this brief overview helps in providing a basic understanding of the different grades used in measuring meat and poultry quality.

If you're interested in requesting meat-grading services and their costs, contact Willard Goad, Customer Service Director, USDA-AMS Livestock and Seed Program, Meat Grading and Certification Branch, at (720) 497-2531, or email willard.goad@ams.usda.gov.

If you produce poultry products and are interested in AMS' poultry-grading services, contact Charles Johnson, Chief, Grading Branch, USDA-AMS Poultry Programs at (202) 720-3271, or email charles.johnson@ams.usda.gov.

Commonly Asked Questions & Answers

Q. *Can the temperature of eviscerated and non-eviscerated poultry carcasses be allowed to exceed 55 °F?*

A. No. Eviscerated and non-eviscerated carcasses are required to be chilled to 40 °F immediately after slaughter following the time requirements for weight of carcass in 9 CFR 381.66(b)(2). During further processing, they may rise to a maximum of 55 °F, provided the temperature is promptly lowered to 40 °F or less, or they are placed in a freezer.

Q. *A corporation has a computer system for paperless records [Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Plan (HACCP) plans, Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOP), Quality Assurance, and lab records]. They sell one of their establishments, and their entire product inventory is shipped to one of their other facilities. What are the regulatory requirements for providing copies of the old and existing records to the new owner?*

A. As long as the seller has HACCP records for their product inventory as required by 9 CFR 417.5(e), it is not required by our regulations to provide any records to the new owner. The USDA/FSIS office in the establishment or the District Office will retain USDA records if needed for review in the event of recalls or other trace-back scenarios. In the event the new owner is allowed to maintain the establishment number and name, records should be available to FSIS to discern the identification of the producer and production dates of product in commerce.

Q. *Is a solution that is captured and reused by a plant to inject flavoring into raw poultry or meat products considered water reuse under 9 CFR 416.2(g)(3)?*

A. No, only water, ice, or solutions reused for the express purpose of chilling or washing raw product are subject to the water reuse requirements in 9 CFR 416.2(g)(3). Solutions that are injected to tenderize product, impart flavor, or to add similar ingredients, are not subject to the water reuse regulatory requirements.

Q. *Is a plant required to document Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOP) and HACCP corrective actions on the noncompliance record (NR), or does it have to have them written down on the company record?*

A. The requirement in 9 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 416.16 and 417.3(c) is that the plant documents SSOP and HACCP corrective actions. The establishment can document these corrective actions on its records or on the NR. If the documentation is on the NR, the NR becomes part of the HACCP or SSOP records and is required to meet the recordkeeping requirements of those regulations.

Q. *Is 180 °F water required for sanitizing equipment used during livestock carcass dressing procedures?*

A. Establishments are required to maintain equipment and utensils in a sanitary condition so as not to adulterate product (9 CFR 416.3), and to clean and sanitize that equipment and utensils as frequently as necessary to prevent adulteration [9 CFR 416.4(a)]. When dressing livestock carcasses that are affected by any disease condition mentioned in 9 CFR 311.16, 9 CFR 311.16(b) requires sanitization of equipment using hot water at a minimum of 180 °F. Chemical sanitizers may be used in lieu of 180 °F water if the requirements of 9 CFR 416.4(c) are met and the chemical sanitizer used provides an equivalent sanitizing effect.