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Facts About Freezer Beef

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When a consumer purchases freezer beef, many factors should be considered prior to the purchase of the meat. First of all, it should be understood that under law the Federal or State Departments of Agriculture (USDA) must inspect all meat for wholesomeness. This law is strictly for the protection of the consumer, insuring all of us that the meat we eat is healthy and wholesome.

It should be firmly understood that the inspection for wholesomeness is mandatory! Grading for quality and yield is strictly voluntary USDA supplies this grading service to the meat packer. In other words, the meat you purchase does not have to be graded for quality under federal or state law. Grading is a classification pertaining to eating quality. The carcass is placed in this classification according to USDA guidelines. It is placed into that grade according to the quality of the carcass. These guidelines consist of maturity or age of the animal and marbling, or distribution of fat flecks through the muscle. These fat flecks will create taste, or eating satisfaction. For example, a USDA Select does not have the abundance of marbling that a USDA choice piece of beef would have. Grading is done only for quality control.

Yield is the cutability factor of the carcass. This means the amount of sellable meat, or the ratio of fat to lean on the carcass. Yield scores are based on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being leaner less waste more meat yield and 5 being more waste, less cutability, less meat. To better understand the grading process, we will explain only the top three quality grades of the grading scale. The lower grades really do not apply to consumer purchases, since these meats are usually used in commercial processing, such as applied tenderization, sausage manufacturing, or other processed and cooked meats. USDA SELECT is the third highest grade in the quality chain. USDA Select has a low abundance of marbling in the muscle. It has a very good cutability, or very minimal amounts of fat to bone as compared to higher quality grades. Cutting losses usually range from 20-28%. USDA Select is used by several large chain stores throughout the country. These stores seldom advertise it as USDA Select, and it is usually sold under their own house brand name. USDA CHOICE is the second highest grade in the quality chain. USDA Choice usually has a nice even distribution of marbling. This grade of beef has the most consumer acceptance. It is marketed by numerous chain stores, and it is almost always advertised by its quality name, USDA Choice. It has a wide range of cutability, as it is also yield graded on a scale of 1 to 5. One meaning a low fat to lean ratio, and five meaning a high fat to lean ratio. Fat and bone cutting losses range from 28-39%. USDA PRIME is

the highest quality grade in the grading chain. It has an extremely high abundance of marbling. It will also have globs of fat in the interior of the muscles. Fat and bone loss range from 32-42%. USDA Prime is marketed to fancy restaurants, hotels, and specialty butcher shops.

When you are making your purchase of freezer beef be sure to have your meat aged. Aging is simply hanging the carcass for a period of 7-14 days. The aging process creates enzymes in the meat that break down the meat fibers causing tenderness. Aging will increase your cutting loss, as the beef will shrink in weight through dehydration. Shrinkage can average from 1½-4% in this 7-14 day period.

Many factors effect the customer's yield, or take-home weight in a freezer beef purchase. To illustrate this, we will use half of a yield 3 choice carcass (or what is termed a side of beef), weighing 300 lbs, cut in a standard manner, and aged for a period of 14 days. The half of beef is separated into six different parts, the loin, round, flank, chuck, rib, and plate. The loin will yield 7-8 sirloin steaks cut 1" thick, 8-10 T-bones also 1" thick, and 4 Porterhouses 1" thick as well. The round will yield 8-10 round steaks cut 5/8" thick, or 6-7 round steaks cut 1" thick. Also a 9-10 lb. sirloin tip, that can be rolled into three 3 lb. average rolled roasts, or two 4½-5 lb. rolled roasts. A 9-10 lb. rump roast that could be cut into 2 or 3 roasts, and a rolled heel of the round roast. The flank contains the flank steak, only about 1 lb. The rest of the flank would be used for ground beef trimmings or stew meat. The chuck will yield 11-13, 3-4 lb. size pot roasts, and one rolled Boston roast of about 3 lbs. The rib will yield 14-16 rib steaks cut 1" thick, or 3 standing rib roasts averaging 5½-6½ lbs., and 3-4 lbs. of short ribs. The plate contains the brisket, which could be saved for a roast averaging 4-5 lbs. The rest of the plate would be used for ground beef trimmings. Ground beef would average about 50 lbs. and would be about 79% lean. If stew beef is desired, it would lower the amount of ground beef that would be received. Soup bones are also included in the purchase. The approximate cutting loss is 33% and the approximate take-home weight would be 200 lbs.

It should be considered that you have many options in the way beef can be cut. You could specify that you wanted some chuck steaks; you may want ribeye steaks made out of your beef rib, or possibly have your loin boned out for boneless butts, NY strip, and fillet mignon steaks. These decisions can also effect your yield. There are all kinds of different ways meat can be cut. Tell your butcher what your family likes, and he/she can advise you on the way your meat could be cut.

The freezing and packaging of your meat are also very important. Your meat should be frozen quickly in a blast freezer. This helps maintain the meat's natural state, and will not ruin the structure of the meat cells. Packaging is important for the protection of your meat. The packaging used should be of the quality that could protect your meat for a minimum of one year from dehydration (freezer burn).

Any inquiries? Please call Inboden's Meats Ltd. at (815) 756-5852 Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. - 7:00 p.m. We are closed Sundays.