

## *USDA Grades Can Help Out Food Shoppers*

**S**HOPPERS IN TODAY'S supermarkets face a bewildering array of products. But there is an increasing amount of information to help them make a rational choice.

Nutritional labeling will soon be used on many products. Open dating, showing the expected shelf life of a product, is being used on more and more products. Unit pricing—showing the cost per ounce, per pint, or other common measure—is also featured by many stores. These subjects are explained in other chapters of this book.

USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) grade shields on certain products can also be useful guides to the shopper who understands their meaning.

You are most likely to find this shield on beef, lamb, turkey, chicken, duck, eggs, and butter. The shield is used less often on canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, veal, calf, Cheddar cheese, instant nonfat dry milk, and—rarely—on fresh fruits and vegetables.

The USDA grade shield is used only on foods that have been officially graded according to the Federal quality grade standards which define exactly what each grade means.

Further, the U.S. Department of Agriculture—and the state departments of agriculture which cooperate in providing the services—will grant grading services only to packers and processors who meet strict requirements for cleanliness and sanitary processing. In the case of meat and poultry, grading may

be done only on products which have passed inspection for wholesomeness.

The grading services are voluntary, not required by Federal law. Packers and processors who want their products to carry the USDA grade shield must apply for the service, meet the requirements, and pay a fee to cover the cost. The service and use of the grade shield are withdrawn if the packer or processor fails to meet sanitation and other requirements (for example, accurate net weights).

Federal grading services began well over 50 years ago. They were originally established as an aid in wholesale trading, to enable the producer to get a price for his product in line with its quality and to let sellers and buyers communicate about quality with a common language.

Today most grading is still done for this purpose, and the consumer is usually the indirect, instead of the direct, beneficiary. However, where the grade shield is used—and carried on the retail package or product—the consumer can use the USDA grades as a direct guide to quality. To do so, he should understand something about the nature of the grades and their limitations.

Grades for each product cover the entire range of quality, so there are more grades for some products than for others. For example, since beef varies widely in quality, it takes eight grades—from USDA Prime to USDA Canner—to span the range. But for broiler-fryers, which are quite uniform in quality, only three grades are needed, USDA Grades A, B, and C.

In most cases, retail stores carry only one or two grades of a product, so it is not necessary for consumers to learn the whole range.

There is some variation in the grade names used because most of the grade names are simply carryovers from many years' use in the food industry. However, with the exception of those used for meat—USDA Prime, Choice, Good, Standard, and Commercial—the most common grades are USDA Grades A and B. In the case of eggs and butter, there is a higher grade, USDA Grade

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AA, which is a premium quality, above that normally considered a very good quality.

Packers of canned and frozen fruits and vegetables may use either of alternative grade terms—U.S. Grade A or U.S. Fancy; U.S. Grade B or U.S. Choice or Extra Standard; U.S. Grade C or U.S. Standard. If you see one of these terms on canned or frozen fruits or vegetables, whether or not used within the grade shield, then the product has been officially graded.

Packers of canned and frozen fruits and vegetables sometimes use those terms without the prefix "U.S." In other words, they may label the product simply "Grade A" or "Fancy." In that case, the product is not required to have been officially graded, but is required to measure up to the quality stated as if it had been. Otherwise, the product is considered misbranded under Federal labeling laws.

Here is a brief summary of the USDA grades for each of the foods which may carry an official grade shield:



## MEAT

This mark on the outer fat covering of a meat cut means it has been officially graded for quality. This is the grade (Choice) you are most likely to see. Several kinds of meat—beef, lamb, veal, and calf—are graded and the same mark is used on each. There are no quality grades for pork at present.

### Beef

Two things are important in buying and cooking beef—the quality grade and the cut. Some cuts, like steaks and roasts from the rib and loin (including

porterhouse, T-bone, club, tenderloin, and sirloin) are fairly tender in any grade you will find in retail stores and can be cooked with dry heat (roasted or broiled). Other cuts, like round steaks and chuck roasts, are less tender and usually should be pot-roasted, braised, or pan-fried.

The beef grades are a guide to how tender and flavorful most cuts will be:

- USDA Prime is the best—the ultimate in tenderness, juiciness, and flavor.
- USDA Choice is very high quality. Steaks and roasts of this grade will be quite tender, juicy, and flavorful.
- USDA Good is somewhat leaner and not as juicy and flavorful as Prime and Choice. It is fairly tender, however, and may be an economical buy.
- USDA Standard has a high proportion of lean and very little fat. It is not as flavorful as higher grades and will be somewhat dry unless cooked with moist heat. But it is fairly tender since, like the above grades, it comes from young animals.
- USDA Commercial has abundant marbling (like Prime) and is very tasty, but since it comes from mature animals it requires long, slow cooking with moist heat to make it tender.

### Lamb, Veal, Calf

Most cuts of Prime and Choice lamb are tender and can be roasted in the oven or broiled. Lower grade lamb is seldom sold at retail. To be called lamb, the meat must come from animals less than a year old. Meat from older sheep is called yearling mutton or mutton, and if it is graded these words will appear with the grade mark.

Prime and Choice grade veal is juicier and more flavorful than lower grades, but most veal is not tender enough to be broiled. Roasts in the higher grades, however, can be oven-roasted. Lower grades should be cooked with moist heat.

Most of the above comments on beef grades apply to the grades of calf, but you cannot expect calf meat to be as savory as more mature beef.



## POULTRY

This grade shield may be found on the package or wing tag on fresh or frozen poultry—chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guineas, squab. USDA Grade A is the only grade you are likely to see—the lower grades, B and C, are practically never printed on a poultry label. Grade A birds have more meat and a better appearance than those of the lower grades. Class of poultry is important, too; look for the word “young” (or words indicating a young bird, such as broiler, fryer) if you want to broil, fry, or roast the bird.



## EGGS

This is the grade shield used on eggs. It may show both the quality grade—USDA Grade AA, A, or B—and the size. Or the size may be printed separately on the carton. Consider both size and grade in buying eggs—they are not related, but both affect the price.

Size means the minimum weight per dozen, not the size of each egg. The sizes sold most frequently are Extra Large—at least 27 ounces per dozen; Large—24 ounces per dozen; Medium—21 ounces per dozen; and Small—18 ounces per dozen.

USDA Grade AA and A eggs have a high, rounded yolk and upstanding, thick white that does not spread out

widely. They are the best to use for poaching and frying. USDA Grade B eggs may have a flatter yolk and thinner white, so are appropriate for use in baked goods and other dishes where appearance is not a factor.



## DAIRY PRODUCTS

You'll find this grade mark on many butter packages. USDA Grade AA butter is the best, with highly pleasing sweet flavor and aroma, smooth texture, and good keeping ability. USDA Grade A is almost as good. USDA Grade B butter may have a slightly acid flavor.

These same grades, and the same grade shield, are used for Cheddar cheese. USDA Grade AA Cheddar cheese has highly consistent good flavor—appropriate for its type (mild, mellow, or sharp), smooth texture, uniform color, and attractive appearance. USDA Grade A Cheddar is also very good, but may vary slightly in flavor and texture from package to package.



## NONFAT DRY MILK

To earn this “USDA Extra Grade” shield, instant nonfat dry milk must have a sweet and pleasing flavor, natural color, and must dissolve instantly when mixed with water. Instant nonfat dry milk may be labeled with the grade shield only if it is manufactured in an officially approved plant, in a sanitary manner, under the continuous inspection of a USDA grader.



## CANNED AND FROZEN FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Either or both of these shields may be found on canned and frozen fruits and vegetables. The "continuous inspection" shield, if used alone, means what it says—that the product was packed in a plant operating under the constant supervision of a USDA grader. It may be used only on products meeting at least minimum quality requirements.

The U.S. Grade A shield may be used only on products which meet the USDA standards for the grade and which have been officially graded.

Grade A fruits and vegetables are the most tender, succulent, and uniform in size, shape, and color. Grade B is a very good quality, but requirements are less strict for uniformity, size, and color—and there may be a few blemishes. Grade C products are fairly good quality, just as wholesome and nutritious as the higher grades, and often a thrifty buy.

## FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Although most fresh fruits and vegetables are sold at wholesale on the basis of U.S. grades, not many are marked with the grade when sold at retail. Packers may mark the grade on products that have not been officially graded, so long as they meet requirements for the grade.

The typical range of grades for fresh fruits and vegetables includes U.S.

Fancy, U.S. No. 1, and U.S. No. 2. For some products there are grades above and below this span. For apples, as an example, the grades are U.S. Extra Fancy, U.S. Fancy, U.S. No. 1, and U.S. Utility.

The grades are based on the product's color, size, shape, maturity, and number of defects. Check for these qualities yourself. Look for color that is typical for the product—especially where it is an indication of maturity or ripeness. Watch for produce that *looks* fresh; avoid any that is wilted or has spots of decay—there may be more inside.

### FOR FURTHER READING:

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