



HOW TO SMOKE MEATS.COM  
VIDEO TUTORIAL SERIES

## USDA BEEF GRADES



Whether you're used to a specific butcher, chain supermarket, or big box store, avoid assuming you are getting the best value and quality for your money.

Chain supermarkets and big box stores are price point driven and may or may not carry any or very much selection of grades above **USDA Choice**, which represents about **66 %** of all market beef.

Some big box stores, specialty and gourmet markets often carry **USDA Prime**, the grade above USDA Choice that represents about **2-3%** of all market beef, or about one in twenty-five market cattle compared to USDA Choice.

MARBLING	MATURITY				
	A	B	C	D	E
Abundant	PRIME		COMMERCIAL		
Moderately Abundant					
Slightly Abundant	CHOICE		UTILITY		
Moderate					
Modest	SELECT		CUTTER		
Small					
Slight	STANDARD				
Traces					
Practically Devoid					

The entire beef carcass is graded by evaluating the white specks of intermuscular fat, or marbling, within the lean muscle tissue between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> ribs.

Some large beef processing plants use digital imaging equipment that compare the image to an algorithm that designates the USDA grade combined with specific age and other information.

The beef should be light red or pink in color and is designated as Maturity A (9-30 months) or Maturity B (30-42 months) to receive the USDA Prime or Choice grades.

Grading is voluntary and used for marketing purposes. Ungraded beef is typically referred to as "NO ROLL" since there is no grade stamp rolled onto the carcass and may or may not be low-end quality, however it is easy to identify since the packaging labels will not have any USDA grade stated.

Learn how to separate the three levels of **USDA Prime**.

Most folks are surprised to learn that there are actually three marbling levels of **USDA Prime** that are not disclosed on the packaging, so you will need to learn how to identify the difference to get the best quality for your money.

The top level of **USDA Prime** is designated as **ABUNDANT** referring to the amount of marbling and represents **less than one-tenth of one percent** of all market beef.

It's unlikely you will ever see this top level of **USDA Prime** since meat wholesalers reserve this top grade for their very best customers, usually fine hotels and restaurants.

**ABUNDANT PRIME** is identified by large thick fat areas dispersed throughout the meat with several small thinner fat areas

**MODERATELY ABUNDANT PRIME** is identified by small thick fat areas dispersed throughout the meat with several small thinner fat areas.

**SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT PRIME** is identified by small thick fat areas in some parts of the meat with several small thinner fat areas.

Compare several packages against each other, then select the ones with the greatest amount of thick fat areas.



**ABUNDANT  
PRIME**



**MODERATELY ABUNDANT  
PRIME**



**SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT  
PRIME**

Learn how to separate the three levels of **USDA Choice**.

The top level of **USDA Choice** is designated as **MODERATE** referring to the amount of marbling and represents the top grade just under USDA Prime.

**MODERATE CHOICE** is identified by few thick fat areas within several small thinner fat areas.

**MODEST CHOICE** is identified by mostly several small thinner fat areas.

**SMALL CHOICE** is identified by a lesser amount of small thinner fat areas.

Compare several packages against each other, then select the ones with the greatest amount of thick fat areas combined with thinner fat areas.



**MODERATE  
CHOICE**



**MODEST  
CHOICE**



**SMALL  
CHOICE**

THANKS TO THE USDA FOR PROVIDING OFFICIAL BEEF GRADING IMAGES

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