

When Meat Matters

Grades of Beef

I look for three things when buying beef—flavor, juiciness, and tenderness. The marbling in beef, white flecks of fat within the meat muscle, determines its flavor—the more marbling, the better the flavor, juiciness, and tenderness.

Beef sold in retail outlets is graded Prime, Choice, or Select. Prime beef has more marbling and, therefore, more flavor. It is the most tender and juicy grade of beef, however, it is higher in fat content. Since only 2 to 3 percent of beef grades out as Prime, it is the most expensive. Choice beef is less expensive than Prime but still has good flavor and tenderness. Select beef has the least marbling, is tough, and lacks flavor. Most supermarkets sell either Choice or Select. Their top line of beef is Choice, however, when advertising special prices, they usually discount Select.

I prefer purchasing Choice-graded beef. I never purchase Select. My palate finds it tough and flavorless. On special occasions, I will often spend the extra money for Prime. I never purchase a Prime-graded standing rib roast, as the Choice grade has enough marbling to ensure a tasty roast. I prefer tenderloins and filet mignons in Choice grade as well. Prime in these cuts is too mushy.

Aging

The best beef is aged. There are two processes for aging beef—dry and wet. “Wet-aged” means the beef is locked in plastic with a bit of water and left for 21 to 28 days. “Dry-aged” means the beef hangs in a cooler so that the blood drains out of the beef. Dry-aging takes from 10 days to 6 weeks. This process yields a very lean, tasty, and dense steak. If you’re looking for the very best cut of beef, purchase “dry-aged” Prime beef. It is not safe to age beef at home.

Labeling on Ground Beef

Some ground beef products are labeled “lean” and “extra lean”. “Lean” means that for every 100 grams of beef there are less than 10 grams of fat, 4.5 grams or less of saturated fat, and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol. “Extra Lean” means for every 100 grams of beef there are less than 2 grams of saturated fat and less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol. Deciding which one to purchase is a “no-brainer”.

Choosing a Meat Market

I like to shop at a reputable butcher shop where I can have my meat cut to order and where I can be assured of good quality beef. Some chain stores will cut meat to order, however, experienced butchers more likely work during the day. If you want meat custom cut, shop during the day if possible. I prefer to purchase Choice meat, therefore, I look for markets that sell Choice.

Today, most chain supermarkets cut their beef in one central location and ship it packaged to surrounding stores. It is possible meat will have already been packaged for a few days before it arrives at its destination. If you buy your meat at a chain store, it is important to choose product that looks fresh.

Beef should be bright cherry red, without brown spots. While some butchers may tell you spots don't effect the beef, spotting indicates the meat has started to spoil. If your market normally has several packages of spotted beef, it's an indication that meat is not selling quickly enough to ensure freshness. Be wary of these markets. Packages of spotted meat will often be on sale and marked "Manager's Special."

shopping



When shopping, make your meat selection last. Shop with your eyes. Look for bright cherry red meat that does not have brownish blotches. Look for packages that are cold to the touch and tightly wrapped with no tears or punctures. Occasionally packages of meat may have a red liquid. This is not blood. Beef is about three fourths water. This liquid is natural moisture from the beef.

Check for dates on packages. Many stores mark packages with a "Sell-By" date. Never buy product that has expired. Frozen beef is safe to use if it has passed its "Sell-By" date provided it was frozen prior to that date. Strictly observe "Use-By" dates specified by manufacturers.



Checking Out

Ask the sacker to bag your meat separately in plastic to contain any leakage that might cross-contaminate other foods.

Storing and Using Beef at Home

Beef should be refrigerated at 40 degrees F immediately upon arriving home and should be used within 3 to 5 days (1 to 2 days for meats like sweetbreads, tongue, or tripe). If you do not plan to use beef within this time frame, freeze it.

It is safe to freeze beef in its original packaging or repackage it in zip-lock freezer bags. If freezing in the original package, it is best to over-wrap the package with aluminum foil to avoid freezer burn. When air reaches the surface of food, it causes grayish-brown, leathery spots known as freezer burn. Portions damaged by freezer burn should be cut away either during or after cooking. Frozen beef should be used within 9 to 12 months.

It is not necessary to wash raw beef before cooking. Any bacteria present on the surface will be destroyed in the cooking process.

While many recipes suggest bringing steaks to room temperature before grilling, steaks should not be removed from the refrigerator more than 30 minutes before grilling.

Grilled Lamb Chops with a Warmed Tomato Relish

SERVES 4

I have found it difficult to find a preparation for lamb that pleases everyone in my family. This one is a keeper.

FOR THE MARINADE

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup balsamic vinegar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon large grind black pepper
- 8 lamb chops, cut 1 ½-inches thick
- 3 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped

In a small bowl, combine olive oil, balsamic vinegar, salt, and pepper and mix well. Place lamb chops in a dish so that they fit tightly together. Coat lamb chops with garlic, cover with marinade, and sprinkle with rosemary. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2 hours. While lamb chops are marinating, prepare ingredients for the relish.

TO BEGIN THE WARMED TOMATO RELISH

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ¾ cup yellow bell pepper, seeded, cored, and chopped
- ¾ cup red onion, chopped

In a large non-stick skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat. Sauté yellow bell pepper and red onion until limp. Remove from the skillet and set aside.

Vegetable cooking spray

Lamb chops are best prepared in a grill pan and cooked on top of the stove, but they can be barbecued. Spray a non-stick grill pan with cooking spray and grill the chops over high heat, about 4 minutes per side for medium-rare.

TO FINISH THE WARMED TOMATO RELISH

- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1 cup tomato, chopped
- ¾ cup lightly-packed arugula, chopped
- 1 teaspoon fresh rosemary, chopped
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, chopped

When chops are almost cooked, add lime juice, tomato, arugula, rosemary, and thyme to the pepper-onion mixture, stirring gently. In the same skillet, return the relish to medium heat and cook until heated through. Relish should be warm but be careful not to overcook. Garnish lamb chops with relish and serve immediately.

Can you imagine making this recipe in a pan that doesn't have a non-stick bottom? We can thank a DuPont chemist, who in the process of trying to develop a refrigerant, accidentally created Teflon.



The best lamb comes from New Zealand.

Stone Crab Claws

SERVES 4

6 gallons water
4 pounds stone crab claws
8 tablespoons butter, melted

Fill a large kettle with 6 gallons of water. Bring water to a full boil and drop crab claws into boiling water. Return water to a full boil and cook crab claws for 3 minutes. Remove crab claws from water and drain. Most supermarkets sell claws that are precooked. They only need to be heated through to serve. Serve melted butter at each place setting in individual cups.



Use a shell cracker, a pair of pliers, or a hammer to crack the claws. Crack the stone crab claws by placing the claw horizontally on a cutting board and striking lightly with a hammer in the center of the claw. Once the claw is cracked, the crabmeat can be removed easily.



Tips on freezing crab: Crabmeat, if cooked fresh and picked from the shell, can be wrapped airtight and frozen at 0 degrees for up to 2 months. Thaw crab only in the refrigerator. Do not thaw at room temperature and do not refreeze.



When cooking with partially cooked crab, the best results are obtained by thawing crab legs and using the meat in cold dishes or by adding the meat to hot dishes only at the last moment, cooking just until heated through, then serving immediately.

Alaskan King Crab Legs with a Light Lemon Mayonnaise

SERVES 4

Along with warm melted butter, I like to serve crab legs with a light lemon mayonnaise. This sauce and butter go nicely with freshly steamed artichoke hearts and fresh French bread.

FOR THE LIGHT LEMON MAYONNAISE

- 2 eggs
- 5 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 1 cup corn oil
- 1 cup light olive oil
- 1 ½ teaspoons lemon zest
- ½ teaspoon large grind black pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried dill
- ½ teaspoon dried tarragon

In a blender, combine eggs, lemon juice, and Dijon mustard and process at a slow speed for 15 seconds. With the machine running, slowly pour in corn and olive oils and process until the mayonnaise is thick. Transfer to a bowl. Fold in lemon zest, pepper, dill, and tarragon. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours before serving.

Crab legs can be boiled, steamed, or broiled for 4 minutes. I prefer boiling.

FOR THE KETTLE

- 6 gallons water
- ½ cup chardonnay wine
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 2 lemon wedges
- 4 pounds frozen Alaskan King crab legs

Fill a large kettle with water and bring to a boil. Add chardonnay wine, bay leaves, garlic, and lemon wedges to boiling water. Add 2 pounds crab legs to the kettle and boil for 4 minutes. Remove crab legs immediately. Add remaining 2 pounds to the kettle, boil for 4 minutes, and remove. Cool.



In planning to serve crab for dinner, a general rule of thumb in determining serving quantities is 4 pounds of crab in the shell will yield about 1 pound of cooked crabmeat (4 servings). Most Alaskan King crab legs sold in supermarkets are slightly pre-cooked, then frozen. Ask your market's fishmonger if the crab you are purchasing has been slightly cooked. This is important because it is easy to overcook pre-cooked crab.



If you purchase crab legs frozen, they can be stored in your freezer until thawed. If the crabmeat has begun to thaw, it should be cooked and eaten on the same day as purchased.

Kumquats

Kumquats are a tiny orange citrus fruit with an oblong or round shape. Because of its thin skin, kumquats are normally eaten whole, rind and all.

SHOPPING: Buy firm, glossy fruit, with leaves still attached to the stem. Pass up fruit that is bruised, wet, or shriveled.

STORING: Kumquats will last a few days when stored at room temperature. If placed in a plastic bag, they will keep 2 weeks in the refrigerator.

AVAILABILITY: December through June.



Hint for Eating: Gently squeeze and massage the skin to blend the flavors of the rind and the flesh before eating.

Lemons

SHOPPING: Lemons should be plump and feel heavy for their size. Select bright, shiny fruit. If the rind is an orange-yellow color, it means the lemon was picked when fully ripe. Pass up shriveled, hard-skinned, soft, or spongy fruit. Lemons with a greenish rind are not as juicy.

STORING: Placed in a plastic bag, lemons will keep up to 2 weeks in the refrigerator.

AVAILABILITY: Year-round. The peak season is April through July.

Limes

There are three varieties of limes—the *Key lime*, the *Persian lime*, and the *sweet lime*. The Key lime is small and full of seeds with a thin, splotchy, yellow-green rind. It is aromatic and juicy, with a strong acidic taste. The Persian lime is larger and almost always seedless. It has a thicker “lime-green” rind. The sweet lime has little acidity and is popular in the Middle East and India.

SHOPPING: Persian limes should feel heavy for their size but not hard when squeezed. Select smooth-skinned, brightly colored fruit that is not shriveled. Brown spots on the rind of Persian limes will not effect the flavor. Key limes should be light yellow with a fine-grained skin. Pass up fruit that is moldy or blotchy. Brown spots on the rind of Key limes will effect their quality.

STORING: Place limes in a plastic bag. Persian limes will keep in the refrigerator for 10 days, Key limes for 5 days.

AVAILABILITY: Persian limes – year-round, Key limes — June through August.

Lychee Nuts

The lychee nut is a most interesting creature. It is a small, round fruit with a tough, knobby shell and a perfume-like fragrance of roses and musk. It is a deep-red color

when picked, but turns rosy brown within a few days. This fruit has clear or white pulp, and its jelly-like flesh will pop out of its shell much like a hard-boiled egg.

SHOPPING: Do not buy lychee nuts that are dried out. Look for nuts with a deep rose color and a thin skin.

STORING: This fruit will keep for several weeks in the refrigerator

AVAILABILITY: June to September.



To eat this interesting creature: Slice open the shell with a paring knife. Gently squeeze the skin until it opens, slide the inner flesh out, and remove its hard seed by cutting the fruit open.

Mangoes

SHOPPING: Mangoes should feel heavy for their size and have firm, unblemished skin. Shop with your sense of smell. Hold the mango to your nose, stem end up, and smell the fruit. If it smells sweet and feels slightly soft to the touch, it is ready to eat. If it smells sour or a bit like alcohol, it has fermented and is not palatable. Also, check the area surrounding the stem. It should be plump and round. A few brown speckles are normal, but avoid spotted or shriveled fruit.

STORING: Most supermarkets sell hard mangoes, and you must ripen them before eating. Therefore, it is a good idea to plan ahead when buying mangoes to allow the fruit time to properly ripen. Leave the fruit at room temperature until the skin yields to pressure but does not feel mushy. Once ripened, mangoes will keep in the refrigerator for 4 days.

AVAILABILITY: Year-round.



To eat: The mango is a pitted fruit. Slice off the top and bottom of the mango, exposing the pit. Place the mango upright on a cutting board. Slice through the fruit on one side with a sharp knife, cutting the flesh in a downward motion, parallel with the pit. Repeat this step on the other side. Place peel side down on the cutting board and cut criss-cross slices through the flesh, stopping at the skin. Loosen the flesh from the skin with the knife. Mango cubes will pop up and can easily be removed with a fork.

Melons

SHOPPING: Melons with lumps or soft spots are passed their prime. Shop with your ears. Knock melons with your knuckle. Hard melons should sound hollow. Do not buy melons that are rock-hard or lopsided.

When selecting a cantaloupe, look for one that is completely covered with a thick straw-colored netting. There should be no trace of the stem. Use your sense of smell. When ripe, cantaloupes will emit a slight cantaloupe fragrance. They will, also, yield to slight pressure on the blossom end, which is the end opposite the stem.