



Aging Beef to Improve Palatability

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Postmortem aging of red meat is the time-honored practice of naturally improving palatability, especially in cuts from the loin and rib. Tenderness is improved when proteases or enzymes break apart the muscle fibers, and reverse the effects of rigor mortis on the carcass.. This occurs rapidly during the first 3 to 7 days postmortem. Most aging effects slow after this time. Aging also changes the flavor of the meat.

There are two methods of aging used. The most common method, wet aging, has become very popular in the last 40 years, with the advancement of boxed beef trade. The other, more traditional method, is dry aging.

Wet Aging: Since the advent of “boxed-beef,” wet aging has been the most common method of aging. Once the carcass is chilled, it is broken down into primal cuts and vacuum-packaged. The meat is “aged” during transportation and further processing, which can take from 3 to 90 days. The average is 17 days.

Dry Aging: This method is the original way of aging. This occurs in a climatically controlled environment. Carcasses on the rail or wholesale cuts are aged without covering or packaging. Methods vary, but the most common conditions are 32-34 F, 80-85% humidity, and .5-2.0 m/sec air flow for 21 to 28 days. Specialty purveyors and restaurants commonly use dry aging in order to offer beef that has a different flavor.

There is a general argument about which method is best. It depends upon resources and the target market. Wet aging is more convenient, requires less cooler space, and results in more yield. Dry aging usually results in a fuller, “beefier” flavor, preferred by some “fine dining” establishments, but requires a serious time and cooler commitment. In addition, up to 50% of some primals are trimmed away, in order to remove the dried, unusable surface of the dry aged cut.

