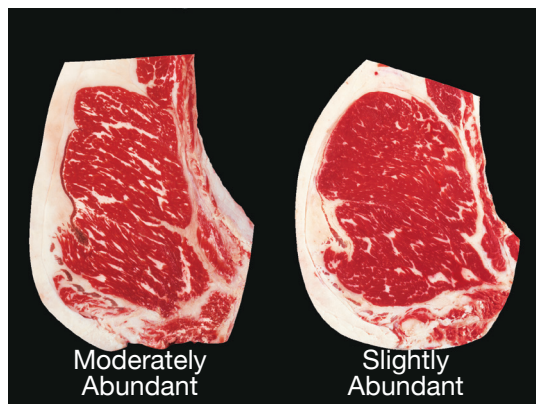


# Understanding USDA Beef Quality Grades



USDA Beef carcass quality grades are determined based on two basic factors: the maturity of the animal at harvest and the amount of intramuscular fat (marbling) in the surface of the ribeye muscle as observed between the 12th and 13th ribs. The vast majority of cattle coming from feedlots and harvested in large facilities are 9-30 months in age, so marbling becomes the deciding factor in determining their quality grade. It is also relative to note that the amount of marbling observed at this one carcass location determines the USDA Quality Grade of every cut from that carcass.

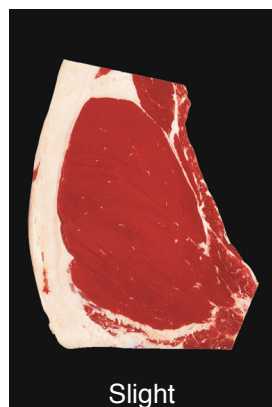


USDA Prime is the highest quality grade. Although the number of beef carcasses that grade Prime has increased in recent years, it is still a very small percentage of total cattle numbers. The minimum degree of marbling required for carcasses to be graded Prime is “Slightly Abundant.” USDA Prime carcasses are the highest priced and would produce cuts that would be expected to have the most pleasurable eating experience. Cuts most commonly consumed as USDA Prime steaks are more often sold at restaurants or will be in the “full service” case at grocery stores or butcher shops.



USDA Choice is the beef quality grade most frequently produced. It is the second highest quality grade and has a minimum degree of marbling requirement for carcasses to be graded Choice as “Small.” USDA Choice carcasses span three degrees of marbling (Small, Modest, and Moderate), and because they are the largest group of carcasses, they were the first to be subdivided by USDA Certified Beef Programs. Many of the first “branded beef” programs (for example Certified Angus Beef® or CAB®) require carcasses to have a “Modest” minimum amount of marbling to be included in their program. Although not a “formal” USDA grade, CAB® and programs with similar marbling requirements have been defined as “top choice,” “premium choice,” or “upper

two-thirds choice” programs because they exclude the USDA Choice carcasses with a “Small” amount of marbling to attempt to enhance eating quality.



USDA Select is the second most frequent quality grade produced. The minimum amount of marbling required for carcasses to be graded USDA Select is “Slight.” Unlike USDA Prime and Choice, the USDA Select grade contains only one degree of marbling - Slight. USDA Select carcasses are frequently leaner both internally and externally. USDA Select is commonly found in retail stores throughout the U.S. as the “commodity” or “common” beef for everyday use.

Ungraded or “No Roll” beef. Carcasses that do not qualify for USDA Prime, Choice or Select can voluntarily be ungraded if the beef plant requests. No Roll is not a grade, but designates the carcass was not identified with a grade by USDA. Rest assured, the beef was inspected for wholesomeness, but was not graded. No roll beef is typically more variable in palatability or cutability traits than beef that was officially graded.

The number of certified programs as well as non-USDA certified programs changes frequently. Many of the programs include claims based on the breed of cattle or grade of the beef or both. USDA certified programs include the assurance that the breed or grade claim were certified by a third party (USDA). Information about the USDA Certified Beef Programs can be obtained online. Others need to be researched independently.

*By D. B. Griffin and J.W. Savell, October 2018*