

How To Select the Right Cuts of Meat

By Curt Hagedorn

Sometimes it seems like there is only one right cut of meat – the boneless, skinless chicken breast in all its boring glory. But if you're one of the growing number of Americans (perhaps emboldened by Atkins, South Beach and other low-carb diets that celebrate steaks and bacon) joining the chicken breast backlash, you'll find that there's a wide variety of delicious, healthy and not so expensive cuts of meat out there – both in beef and pork – to fill your daily protein requirement.

The cut of meat you choose is pretty much based upon how you plan to prepare it. If you want to pick up a steak, toss it in a pan or on a grill, could it a few minutes on each side and consume, you're going to want to get a piece of tenderloin – the famous filet mignon and its counterpart the pork tenderloin. If you take a look at a filet mignon in its raw form, you'll find that it's delicately marbled, that there's a network of veins of fat running more or less uniformly throughout the steak. What this means, of course, is both flavor and tenderness – it's what gives filet mignon its buttery, cut into it with a fork texture and rich taste. Of course, at around \$18 or more a pound, filet mignon isn't an everyday cut for most of us, but it doesn't need to be. Our nation's beef producers are constantly working to come up with both new cuts of meat and new ways of handling both the cattle and the beef to improve flavor, texture and ease of preparation.

Other great steaks for grilling or pan searing include the porterhouse, T-bone, the New York strip steak (or just strip steak – the names of cuts of meats are often regionally inspired, matters of tradition or, well, sales tools for both butchers and restaurants handed down for years.) Rib eye steaks are also great on the grill, and one of the new steak cuts, the flatiron steak, taken from the beef shoulder, is also growing in popularity for its flavor and its relatively modest price. If you're wondering about those chuck steaks and other large, bone in cuts of meat, they can also be great grilled or sautéed but really benefit from an overnight marinade – dump some red wine, a little olive oil, onions, shallots, garlic, herbs in a zip top bag, put in the steak, close and toss around for a bit, then put in the refrigerator and turn every few hours for a minimum of a couple of hours at least or over night. Marinating is a good idea for any of the tougher cuts of meat. Of course ribs are also great on the grill, though short ribs of beef, both beef and pork ribs and roasts, and the various meats packages as stew meat in the grocery store from beef to lamb all become miraculously tender and delicious when given a long braising in a crock pot or slow oven with some aromatic vegetables and some liquid – wine, stock, beer, cider, whatever is appropriate. A few hours later, whip up some butter egg noodles or rice or merely sop up the juices with some crusty bread and meat falling off the bone.

Though as you stare at the meat case, you may be drawn toward the signs that say extra lean and 97 percent fat free, remember the mantra “fat = flavor,” and that slow cooking or pan searing renders a great deal of the fat. You can always trim excess fat of any meat – and it’s a good idea – and of course if you’re buying ground meat it depends on whether really want that extra flavor – as in a hamburger or meatballs – or are using the meat for some other purpose, such as in a casserole or on a pizza, in which case the lean meat is probably your best deal.

Another interesting note on red meat – it’s been found that cattle fed exclusively on grass have high levels of the same kind of Omega 3 fatty acids that doctors recommend consuming in fish to lower cholesterol and help prevent heart disease. Grass fed beef normally comes from Nebraska and a few other Midwestern states, so if you can find it you might just be able to have your steak and your heart health too.

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