

An Illustrated Guide to Tender Steaks

There are a lot of steaks to choose from, which can make things very confusing. Here's exactly what you get for your money when you buy each particular steak.

BY DAWN YANAGIHARA WITH JOHN WILLOUGHBY

It's not easy to select a steak from the supermarket meat case. Steaks come in all different shapes and sizes, are sold at varying prices, and are often slapped with bold, bright "Great for Grilling" stickers that vie for your attention. To further confuse matters, steak cuts often go by different regional names. Consequently, turning to cookbooks is sometimes of no help, and asking a supermarket butcher for a steak by name can result in frustration. Marketers have also invented fanciful names for different steaks, further muddying the water.

Here we try to make sense of it all. We identify the most common tender steaks found in the supermarket,

explain what section of the steer each comes from, and advise you about its qualities and most common aliases. We also rate the steak cuts for tenderness and flavor (★★★★ being best) and cost (\$\$\$\$ being most expensive).

The term *steak* refers to any thin cut of meat, but not all steaks are suitable for quick high-heat grilling, searing, or pan-frying. Here we limit ourselves to those steaks that are best suited for a quick sear in a hot pan or a sizzling stint on a grill. We have not included hanger and skirt steaks, both of which we like, because they are almost impossible to find in grocery stores. London broil is often gone missing, too, but for a different reason: London broil is not a

particular type of steak but a method of cooking and cutting the meat. If you see steak in the supermarket that is labeled "London Broil," it may be anything from a shoulder steak to a top round steak.

Making the Grade

There are eight USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) beef grades, but most everything available to consumers falls into the top three: Prime, Choice, and Select. The grades classify the meat according to fat marbling and age, which are relatively accurate predictors of palatability; they have nothing to do with freshness or purity. Grading is strictly voluntary

on the part of the meat packer. If it is graded, the meat should bear a USDA stamp indicating the grade, but it may not be visible. Ask the butcher when in doubt.

In our blind tasting of rib-eye steaks from all three grades, Prime ranked first for its tender, buttery texture and rich beefy flavor; it was discernibly fattier. Choice came in second, with solid flavor and a little more chew. The Select steak was tough and stringy, with flavor that was only "acceptable." The lesson here is this: when you're willing to splurge, a Prime steak is worth the money, but a Choice steak that exhibits a moderate amount of marbling is a fine and more affordable option.

CONSUMER BEEF GRADES



Prime

Prime meat is heavily marbled with intramuscular fat, which makes for a tender, flavorful steak. A very small percentage (about 2 percent) of graded beef is graded Prime. Prime meats are most often served in restaurants or sold in high-end grocery stores and butcher shops.



Choice

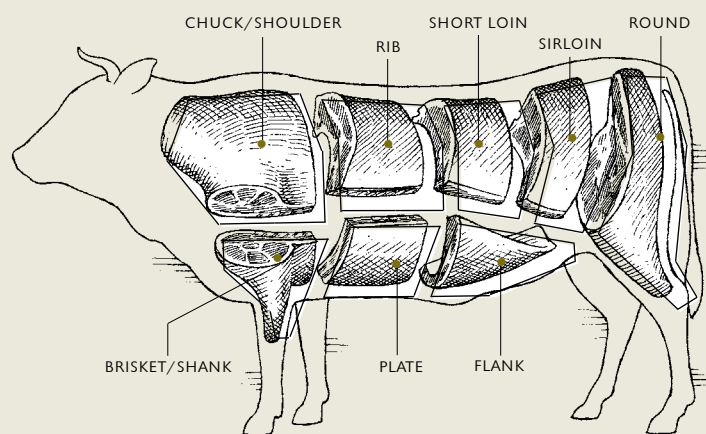
The majority of graded beef is graded Choice. Choice beef is moderately marbled with intramuscular fat, but within the category there are varying levels of marbling.



Select

Select beef has little marbling. The small amount of intramuscular fat can make Select meats drier, tougher, and less flavorful than the two higher grades.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMAL CUT STEAKS



Chuck Steaks The chuck section, or shoulder area, includes ribs 1 through 5 as well as the shoulder blade bone. Most steaks cut from the chuck area are not suitable for grilling or quick high-heat cooking—some chuck steaks are downright tough and others may contain unpleasant amounts of gristle and fat.

Rib Steaks The rib section is located just behind the chuck, or shoulder area, and contains ribs 6 through 12. Its claim to fame is the prime rib roast. The steaks from the rib section are of high quality, with a rich, smooth texture and pockets of fat in the meat.

Short Loin Steaks The short loin section is located behind the rib section, in the middle area of the back. Steaks cut from the short loin are of very high quality. The

tenderloin, renowned for its buttery texture, extends through the short loin and is found in the T-bone and porterhouse steaks that are cut from this section.

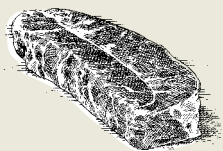
Sirloin Steaks The sirloin section is just behind the short loin section and is sometimes referred to as the hip area. Sirloin steaks are fairly large but thin, and the meat is only moderately tender with decent flavor. The meat tends to be lean and rather dry, but it is a good value.

Flank Steak The flank is located on the underside belly area, directly below the short loin and sirloin. Steaks from this section have a rich, beefy flavor but must be sliced thinly and on the bias to counteract their chewy texture and long grain.

CHUCK STEAK

Top Blade

TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$

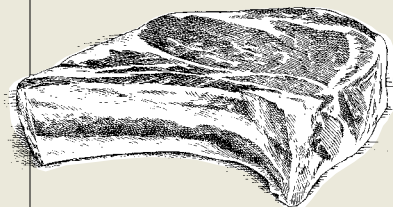


➤ These small steaks are cut from the shoulder area of the cow. Top blade steaks are tender, but each has a line of gristle running down the center. They are inexpensive and perfectly suited to grilling or sautéing. Top blade steak is often called flatiron steak or blade steak.

RIB STEAKS

Rib

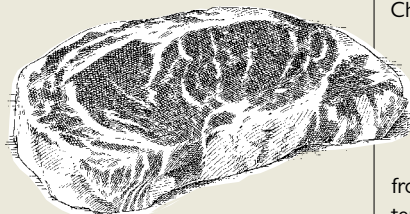
TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$



➤ Imagine a prime rib roast at a hotel buffet or banquet. A rib steak is a steak cut from that rib roast, with the curved rib bone attached. Rib steaks are less prevalent than the boneless version, the rib eye.

Rib Eye

TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$



➤ A rib-eye steak is a rib steak with the bone removed. Sans bone, the steak has an oval shape with a narrow strip of meat that curves around one end. Rib-eye steaks, like other steaks from the

rib section, contain large pockets of fat and have a rich, smooth texture. Rib eye is often known as Spencer steak in the West and Delmonico steak in New York.

SHORT LOIN STEAKS

Top Loin

TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$



➤ This long, narrow, triangular steak may be sold bone-in or boneless. Its most common bone-in alias is shell steak. Boneless top loin is also known as strip steak, hotel steak, sirloin strip steak (don't be confused—it's not cut from the sirloin, see below), Kansas City strip, and New York strip. The top loin steak is a bit chewy, with a noticeable grain, and is slightly less fatty than the rib or rib-eye steak.

Tenderloin

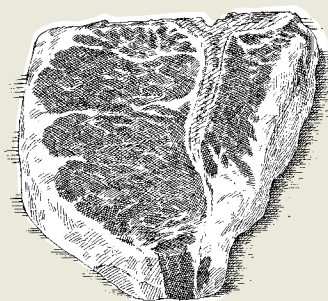
TENDERNESS ★★★★★
FLAVOR ★
COST \$\$\$\$



➤ The tenderloin, a long, cylindrical muscle that is the most tender meat on the cow, may be cut into a number of different steaks, each of which has its own name but all of which are very expensive, since Americans prize tenderness above all else in their steaks. Chateaubriand is a 3-inch-thick steak cut from the thickest part of the tenderloin, usually large enough to serve two. Filet, filet mignon, or tenderloin steak is typically 1 to 2 inches thick, cut from the narrow end of the tenderloin. Tournedos are the smallest tenderloin steaks, about an inch thick, cut toward the tip end. Tenderloin steaks are extremely tender but are not known for having much beefy flavor.

T-Bone

TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$



➤ The T-shaped bone in this steak separates the long, narrow strip of top loin and a small piece of tenderloin. Since it contains top loin and tenderloin meat, the T-bone is well balanced for texture and flavor.

Porterhouse

TENDERNESS ★★★
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$

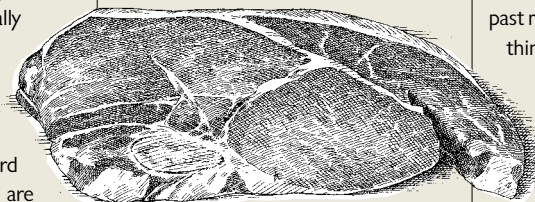


➤ The porterhouse is really just a huge T-bone steak with a larger tenderloin section. It is cut farther back in the animal than the T-bone, the porterhouse, with both top loin and tenderloin sections, has well-balanced flavor and texture.

SIRLOIN STEAKS

Round-Bone or Shell Sirloin

TENDERNESS ★★
FLAVOR ★★
COST \$

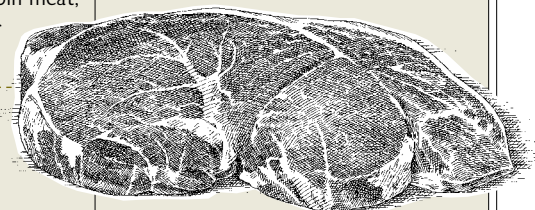


➤ Several steaks are cut from the sirloin, or hip, section; moving from the front

to the rear of the steer, they are pin- or hip-bone steak, flat-bone steak, round-bone steak, and wedge-bone steak. Of these, the round bone is best; the others are rarely found in supermarkets. Shell sirloin steak is simply a round-bone sirloin steak that has had the small piece of tenderloin removed. It is most commonly found in the Northeast and is sometimes called New York sirloin. Do not confuse sirloin steaks with the superior top loin steak, which is sometimes called sirloin strip steak.

Top Sirloin

TENDERNESS ★★
FLAVOR ★★
COST \$

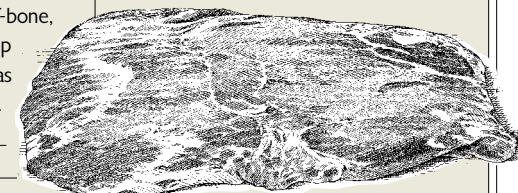


➤ This steak is merely a boneless shell sirloin steak. It is sometimes sold as boneless sirloin butt steak or top sirloin butt center cut steak. Again, do not confuse this steak with top loin steak, which is sometimes called sirloin strip steak.

FLANK STEAK

Flank

TENDERNESS ★★
FLAVOR ★★★★★
COST \$\$



➤ Flank steak is a large, thin, flat cut with a distinct longitudinal grain. To minimize the stringy, chewy nature of flank steak, it should not be cooked past medium and should always be sliced thinly across the grain. It is usually sold whole, although some grocery stores package flank steaks cut into smaller portions. Flank steak is sometimes called jiffy steak.

Illustration: John Burgoyne