

What ‘Lean’ Means in Beef Marketing

Healthy eating is a growing concern for many Americans. The market is flooded with food options boasting “reduced fat,” “low fat” or “no fat.” Meat products join in, to the extent they can be described as “lean.”

Meats offer many benefits, including some essential dietary fats. “They are an incredible source of protein, and all the amino acids that are needed for health,” says Dr. Betsy Booren, director of scientific affairs for the American Meat Institute Foundation. “They also have nutrients like iron, zinc, niacin, selenium, riboflavin and other B vitamins.”

But to be considered “lean” by USDA definition, meat must contain less than 10 grams total fat, 4.5 grams or less of saturated fat and less than 90 milligrams of cholesterol per serving.

All of the hype about fat has led some consumers to believe meat cannot be healthy if it tastes good. They might think the only way to get lean beef is to buy from the lower-grade Select case. But flavor does not have to be the sacrificial lamb of healthy eating.

Lots of high-quality cuts of beef are “lean” as well. For example, the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand is known for full flavor but has 24 cuts that also hit the lean beef target. Those range from roasts and brisket to tenderloin steak (see table).

“A lot of processed products advertised as lean, especially the cheaper ones, don’t have much flavor because they are made with soy and added water to dilute the fat,” says Mark Gwin quality control and research and development manager for CAB. “I’d rather enjoy more flavor in a balanced diet and have a glass of water on the side,” he adds.

“Intramuscular fat (IMF), or marbling, largely determines beef carcass value,” says Texas A&M University meat biologist Stephen Smith. “Beef with more marbling tastes better to most people.”

“The difference in total fat percentage between Select and Choice is only between 2% and 3%,” Gwin says. “When consumers purchase less-marbled, Select cuts, they are giving up a lot of palatability, texture and

quality for a very small difference in that total.”

Marbling can offer more than improved taste. “There’s a health benefit to eating well-marbled beef, compared to the lower-grading kind,” Smith says. Beef with more marbling contains more oleic acid, and it has been shown that oleic acid can decrease LDL cholesterol. The levels of saturated and trans-fatty acids in beef decrease with more oleic acid.

Most lean beef cuts come from the round or the chuck, but other products like the brisket or 95% lean ground beef are included in the category as well. However, not all lean beef is equal.

Smith and a team of researchers found the brisket contained high levels of oleic acid while the plate and the flank had more saturated fat than any of the others they studied.

Even though lean meats are considered a healthy food product, Booren advises consumers not to get carried away with eliminating fat in their diet. “Fats sometimes get a bad rap, but having a level of fat, whether it’s saturated or unsaturated, is necessary for healthy living also,” she says.

Consumers can still maintain healthy diets while enjoying meats that fall just outside of the lean category. “If people like the flavor and the palatability of some cuts of the higher grade beef, they need to look at portion size,” Booren says.