

Meeting Demand with Quality

Consumers buy higher-quality steaks; farmers change breeding to meet demand.

by **DUANE DAILEY,**

MU Copperative Media Group

Consumers are upgrading their beef buying habits. They prefer steaks that are USDA Choice and Prime quality. Supermarkets noted that demand shift and filled more of their meatcases with high-quality beef.

Now, producers must meet that increasing demand. They have an opportunity to garner premiums for calves that grade Choice and Prime, as buyers pay more for the high-quality beef.

In recent years, there was little price difference paid for Choice over Select grades of beef. Recently, however, premiums for higher quality grades continue to increase.

Those lessons in beef marketing were shared by Larry Corah, vice president of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), at a meeting of northwest Missouri farmers in King City. CAB is a nonprofit subsidiary of the American Angus Association, serving the Association and its members by marketing the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand. Among its quality

specifications, cattle must grade in the upper two-thirds of the Choice grade or higher to be labeled with the CAB brand.

Reasonable preference

There's a reason people prefer high-quality meat, Corah told attendees. "A

properly cooked Prime steak will likely be tender, juicy and flavorful. Those characteristics make for an enjoyable eating experience."

Chefs at white-tablecloth restaurants learned that serving high-quality beef brings customers back.

"If you pay big bucks for dinner, a tough steak gets your attention," Corah said.

Eating satisfaction relates to USDA Quality Grades. The grades include, from the top, Prime, Choice, Select and Standard (see Table 1).

Restaurants find that only one in 26 Prime steaks will be sent back to the kitchen by an unhappy diner. However, if Select steaks are served, one in five will be returned.

"At 20%, that's way too high a probability of a poor eating experience," Corah said.

Much of a quality grade depends on the amount of marbling in a steak. Marbling is the term used to describe the flecks of fat between muscle cells in a steak. Marbling brings tenderness, juiciness and flavor.

Short on supply

Currently, only about 3% of carcasses at U.S. packing plants grade Prime. However, 40% grade Select.

For marketing under the CAB brand,
(Continued on page 110)

Table 1: USDA quality grading system and marbling score

Quality Grade	Amount of Marbling	Numerical Score
Prime ⁺	Abundant	10.0-10.9
Prime	Moderately abundant	9.0-9.9
Prime ⁻	Slightly abundant	8.0-8.9
Choice ⁺	Moderate	7.0-7.9
Choice	Modest	6.0-6.9
Choice ⁻	Small	5.0-5.9
Select	Slight	4.0-4.9
Standard	Traces	3.0-3.9
Standard	Practically devoid	2.0-2.9
Utility	Devoid	1.0-1.9

Meeting Demand with Quality *(from page 108)*

carcasses must grade Prime or high-Choice. About 20% of plant-run carcasses qualify for CAB premiums.

Farmers have control over how steaks will grade, said Corah. “While genetics is very important, nutrition, health and management all play a part.”

Bull selection is a starting point.

Records show that of calves from the top 10% of Angus bulls for carcass merit, 4% grade Prime. But only 1% grade Prime from the bottom 10% of bulls. Also, carcass weight of calves from the top bulls averages 750 pounds (lb.), while carcasses of calves from the bottom 10% of bulls average 100 lb. lighter.

“Calves can have both quality and weight gain,” Corah said, as has been documented in several articles published in the *Angus Beef Bulletin*.

Corah pointed out that calves from the University of Missouri (MU) Thompson Farm, Spickard, Mo., average 31% Prime, far above the national average. Plus,

“If you pay big bucks for dinner, a tough steak gets your attention.”

— *Larry Corah*

86% of the calves have garnered CAB premiums.

For now, 10% of all CAB beef comes from Missouri herds, Corah said. That means Missouri producers can gain a bigger share of the premiums.

Most of the MU calves are sired by artificial insemination (AI) from performance-proven bulls. AI gives access to the top sires in a breed.

“There’s a myth that there is no money to be made by producing high-quality cattle,” Corah said. Records show that quality-grid premiums paid to the top 25% of calves were \$122 over market price last year. Premiums for calves in the top 50% averaged \$95 over market price.

With current premiums, those dollars could double this year, Corah added. He told producers that there is a Missouri recipe for high-quality calves (see “Missouri Shows U.S.” in the February 2011 *Angus Beef Bulletin*).

Management practices such as birth sequence affect quality grade in the recipe. Of calves in the first 25% of birth dates, 85% will receive CAB premiums. But of late calves, the last 25% born, only 11% qualify for CAB.

CAB Quality Specs

Marbling and maturity

1 Modest or higher marbling – for the taste that ensures customer satisfaction

2 Medium or fine marbling texture — the white “fleck” of flavor” in the beef that ensure consistent flavor and juiciness in every bite

3 Only the youngest classification of product qualifies as “A” maturity — for superior color, texture and tenderness

The next three specifications ensure a uniform, consistent steak size:

4 10- to 16-square-inch ribeye area

5 Less than 1,000-pound hot carcass weight

6 Less than 1-inch fat thickness



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Above: Missouri-source calves represent at least 10% of total CAB supplies today, and perhaps an even higher share of CAB Prime. That's more than 300,000 cattle yielding nearly 40,000 tons of boxed product for the brand, CAB's Larry Corah says.

With timed AI, more of the calf crop will be born early in the calving season, bringing a more uniform calf crop.

In his presentation, David Patterson, MU beef reproduction specialist, outlined research for breeding by appointment at the Thompson Farm, a part of the Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station.

The Missouri recipe produces high-quality replacements in the Show-Me-Select Heifer Program (see 2011 requirements at <http://agebb.missouri.edu/select/prgmreq.htm>). Heifers can be enrolled for the 2012 breeding season by contacting regional livestock specialists through county MU Extension centers.



Editor's Note: Duane Dailey is senior writer for the MU Cooperative Media Group, which provided this article.

And finally, four specifications further ensure the quality appearance and tenderness of the brand:

7 Superior muscling (restricts influence of dairy cattle)

8 Practically free of capillary ruptures (ensures the most visually appealing steak)

9 No dark cutters (ensures the most visually appealing steak)

10 No neck hump exceeding 2 inches (safeguards against cattle with more variability in tenderness)

