

Taste Appeal

Beef's true value is brought to life by value cuts.

Story by
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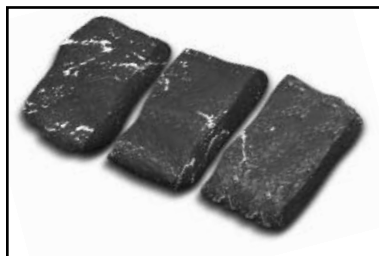
You've probably seen it on a menu by now. You've maybe even tried it. The first time I saw the flat-iron steak about a year ago, I thought it was just one restaurant's way of promoting a special entrée. The waiter was particularly persuasive, so I took the risk and ended up having a wonderful steak.

At that time I was unaware of the checkoff-funded Beef Value Cuts program. The R&D Ranch® of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) was created in 1997 to help industry partners identify and develop new beef and



Beef Steak Alorno prepared from flat-iron steak (right).

[PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CATTLEMEN'S BEEF BOARD]



veal products to complement and grow their businesses. The chuck and round were areas in which the R&D team believed the industry could discover new value. Thus, the Beef Value Cuts were born.

Today, the flat iron is the No. 1 star of the program, reports Tony Mata, the technical coordinator of new product development for NCBA. But, the road to product introduction was long and challenging.

"Initially it was difficult to sell because we did not have the credibility," points out Mata, who has been working on the project for 10 years. "The muscle-profiling study really helped us convince the various segments of the industry that, in fact, those were muscles that justified the investment in value adding."

The muscle-profiling study, which identified key muscle characteristics of the carcass, was funded by the Cattlemen's Beef Board (CBB). The research was performed by Chris Calkins at the University of Nebraska and Dwain Johnson at the University of Florida. Mata says selling the Beef Value Cuts program became a much easier proposition after this in-depth study.

Carcass design

Many years ago, industry defined how a carcass would be broken, or segmented into different primals, Mata says, based on the knowledge at the time. In some instances muscles were separated between different subprimals and did not fair well.

Over time the beef industry has found that the best approach to add value to the carcass is to merchandise it as individual muscles, rather than as groups of muscles or muscle pieces.

"This needs to begin at the packer side," Mata says, "and it's a major change. We need to recognize that changing the way packers break down carcasses is going to require changing the way manufacturing lines are laid out. In order to add value effectively, it is best to start with individual muscles. And that is the direction in which the industry is going."

The majority of packers are processing Beef Value Cuts, with nationwide foodservice distribution to more than 1,300 restaurants, Mata reports.

The Beef Value Cuts program has been most successful with the foodservice industry, Mata reports. "We are looking at the challenges at the retail level and reassessing our approach so that we make as much progress as we've made in foodservice."

Mata says value cuts will continue to add profits to the chuck and the round, which make up approximately 53% of the carcass. While there are seven muscles from both the chuck and round in the Beef Value Cuts program, the subprimal that has received the most attention by the industry is the shoulder clod, a part of the chuck.

The shoulder clod weighs approximately 18-20 pounds (lb.) from one side of beef. This subprimal brings about \$1.25 to \$1.50 per lb. without further processing, Mata says. Three value cuts — the ranch cut, flat iron and petite tender — can be recovered



Gorgonzola Beef Steak prepared from ranch-cut steak (below).



from this portion and sold at a retail market price anywhere from \$4 per lb. to \$9 per lb.

Meet three temptations

"Each individual muscle has its own characteristics, its own personality," Mata says. Before muscles that make up the ranch cut, flat iron and petite tender proved their steak appeal, they were simply part of a roast or ground for hamburger. With proper trimming and trained meat processors, these cuts add dollars to the chuck and take pressure off the middle meats, which include traditional steaks like the ribeye or sirloin.

The largest muscle in the shoulder clod makes up the **ranch-cut steak**. That individual muscle is about 5-8 lb., and yields approximately 70% steak material, Mata says.

"Based on the consumer research that we have conducted, this particular cut is comparable to sirloin cuts in performance," he says. "It is a cut that has a great visual appeal."



Shoulder Tender Roast prepared from petite tender (above). It can also be cut and served as medallions.

"The flat iron and petite tender, because of uniqueness and trimming challenges and/or size, may end up being most successful in foodservice, but [for] the ranch cut we see equal potential in foodservice and in retail," Mata adds.

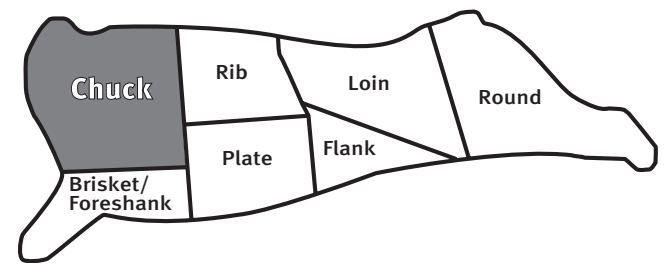
The overall shape that is generated from the ranch cut resembles the strip steak and is a very versatile type of cut. It can be cut into 4- to 12-ounce (oz.) portions. At retail the cut brings between \$4 and \$6 per lb.

The **flat-iron steak** is unlike any other cut, Mata says, as it actually improves in tenderness and juiciness as it is cooked — to a point. It's one of the most tender muscles — second only to the tenderloin. It comes from the top blade portion of the carcass.

The top blade is about 5-7 lb. and yields approximately 50% steak material. It requires proper training in steak-cutting. It can be cut into 4- to 16-oz. portions.

"The challenging side is that training and proper preparation by the processor and/or the butcher is

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required. There is a gristle in the middle of this particular muscle that must be removed properly. If they don't remove it the consumer is going to have a poor eating experience," Mata says. "But now that we know about that muscle, we can make recommendations as to how to trim it and how to get the best out of it."

At retail the flat iron ranges in price from \$5 to \$9 per lb.

The **petite tender** is small in size, with only about ¾ lb. to 1 lb. in each shoulder clod. There are only two petite tenders in the entire beef carcass. The cut yields 90% steak material or medallion material.

"The challenge with it is it is a very small cut, and because of that it's probably going to be a foodservice item rather than a retail item," Mata says. It has a very unique, fine texture. It's one of the most tender muscles and has a very delicate flavor. The petite tender can be served as tender medallions or prepared as a steak.

The petite tender retails between \$5 and \$7 per lb.

Conquering challenges

The trick to merchandising value cuts is moving all product as a result of the processing, which Mata says was the top reason he met resistance with meat processors. "The majority would say, 'I am interested in the flat iron, but I am not interested in the shoulder tender or the ranch cut; therefore, I am not interested in the program because I can only use 20% or 30% of that shoulder clod,'" Mata remembers. "I don't have interest in the rest so it becomes burdensome to my operation."

Emphasis has been placed on developing markets for all value cuts so they are desirable to processors, Mata says. Once the value cuts are taken from the shoulder clod, there is another 3 lb. of several smaller muscles that are used for pot roast. There's also 1-1½ lb. of lifter meat, a popular item with further processing into steak pieces for fast-food restaurants. Pot roast may sell for \$2-\$3 per lb., and lifter meat sells for about \$1.80 per lb.

"We are able to look at the carcass in a different way," Mata adds. "The industry, via checkoff dollars, invested in the research that made us aware of incredible opportunities in the chuck and round. ... Sometimes in new product development you wait too long or work on too many things that don't materialize in the marketplace. It is very rewarding to see what's happening with these cuts with consumers."