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YOUR PERFECT
STEAK

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Beef Grading Systems

There are various beef grading systems around the world, and as steak students, we should know what they are and how they work. Although I'm not biased in any way, the Aussie system, Eating Quality Assured (EQA), which is underpinned by Meat Standards Australia (MSA) grading system, has to be the standard by which all others are judged. Since its inception, more than 500,000 consumer tests (10,000 in the United States) have been conducted, all aimed at identifying what makes a steak perfect. A fascinating finding of this world-leading study was that "Consumer expectations for eating quality were virtually identical around the world."[1] Amazing! That said, I think we should look a bit more into this because if consumers around the world have similar expectations for eating a quality steak, then we need to know exactly what they are.

The key to the system is what's called the Meat Quality Score (MQ4), and it's based on the importance consumers give to four key variables when it comes to deciding the deliciousness of a piece of meat. These four variables are:

Tenderness
Juiciness
Flavour
Overall Liking

Each is given a percentage with the most important of all being *tenderness*. Tenderness makes up 40 percent of a consumer's overall liking of a piece of beef. I think that's a staggeringly important piece of information and one we can really use to craft our perfect steak.

Here's a question for you. What importance do you think tasters gave to *flavour*? Intuitively you might have thought it was very important, perhaps even more important than tenderness, but no. Flavour was rated at only 20 percent importance to the overall eating quality of a piece of steak, that is, half as important is tenderness. The other two significant factors that made up the test results were *juiciness*, receiving only 10 percent importance, and *overall liking*, which combined a bundle of tangible and intangible factors making up the final 30 percent.

As steak chefs, knowing the importance people place on the various characteristics of a piece of steak gives us a real advantage in preparing our perfect steak. Knowing for instance that tenderness is the single most important factor allows us to do everything in our power to select and serve tender meat.

Knowing what makes a steak great is what will make you a great steak chef.

It's easier to flavour a tender piece of meat than it is to tenderise a flavoursome piece of meat.

But what is tenderness actually? In an effort to define it, scientists at the University of Nebraska conducted a study in which highly trained people on sensory panels were charged with defining exactly what tenderness was.

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1   http://australian-meat.com/uploadedFiles/Foodservice/Resources/Publications/EQA_Broch.pdf

Terms they came up with included *softness to tooth pressure*, *feeling on the tongue and cheek,* and *ease of fragmentation*[2] when biting a piece of cooked meat. A scientific instrument called the Warner Bratzler Shear Device has even been developed to objectively measure the range from toughness to tenderness of a piece of meat.

If we're preparing for tenderness, then there are some very straightforward and effective things we can control.

These include:

- Selecting steaks classed as prime (not primal) cuts
- Buying steak from animals no older than thirty-six months
- Selecting meat with visible marbling (The study found that intramuscular fat reduced the amount of force required to bite through it and had a lubricating effect, which increased the perception of tenderness.)
- Leaving the meat in the refrigerator for a few days before eating it (The University of Nebraska professors found that this simple technique, called *Cool Aging*, was one of the most effective ways to improve meat tenderness.)
- And of course, letting steak rest before serving

2   *Ranking of Beef Muscles for Tenderness*, by Chris R. Calkins, PhD; and Gary Sullivan, University of Nebraska

How To Cool Age Steak at Home: A Scaled Back Version of Dry Aging Beef

Further on I discuss the processes of dry and wet aging. Dry aging is a very specialised process requiring careful management of temperature and humidity.

It's not that hard however to do a scaled back version of dry aging at home called cool aging, which also yields good results. A word of warning though: it's not a pretty sight. At the end of a week, your beautiful cut of meat is going to resemble something akin to the wicked witch of the west. Fear not. Once you trim away the crusty outer layer, you'll be left with some of the most tender steak you've ever eaten.

Start with a full cut of meat rather than steaks that have already been sliced. We need the meat to be of a decent size because we need remove the outer crust at the end.

1. Select a premium or prime cut, such as a sirloin or scotch fillet.
2. Remove the meat from any plastic wrapping, pat it completely dry with a cloth or paper towel, then wrap it loosely in a triple layer of cheesecloth or muslin and set it on a rack in the coolest part of the refrigerator (towards the bottom at the back). Do not trim any excess fat off the meat.
3. Ensure that the meat is elevated. It needs to be sitting on a rack and have as much airflow around it as possible.
4. The meat can age here quite safely for up to seven days.
5. After the first day, unwrap the muslin or cheesecloth from the meat, and rewrap it so that it doesn't stick to the meat.
6. When you're ready to cook, remove the cheesecloth and trim the meat. It will have formed a dry, hard, discoloured outer layer. Shave this away. Also trim any excess fat.
7. The meat is now ready to be cut into steaks or to cook as a whole roast. Over the aging period, the meat will have significantly tenderised due to the action of enzymes and the breakdown of connective tissue.

USDA Select beef varies in taste, tenderness, and juiciness but is still considered of good quality. Select has minimal marbling, which makes it leaner (something that many people desire) but not as tender as the top two grades. Anything below Select is not really suitable for grilling.

If you're interested in studying grading systems further, you can look up the European Beef Grading System (EUROP), the Japan Meat Grading Association (JMGA), and Canada Prime.

The chart below lists the main prime cuts and includes comments about each one in terms of tenderness, flavour, and overall eating quality.
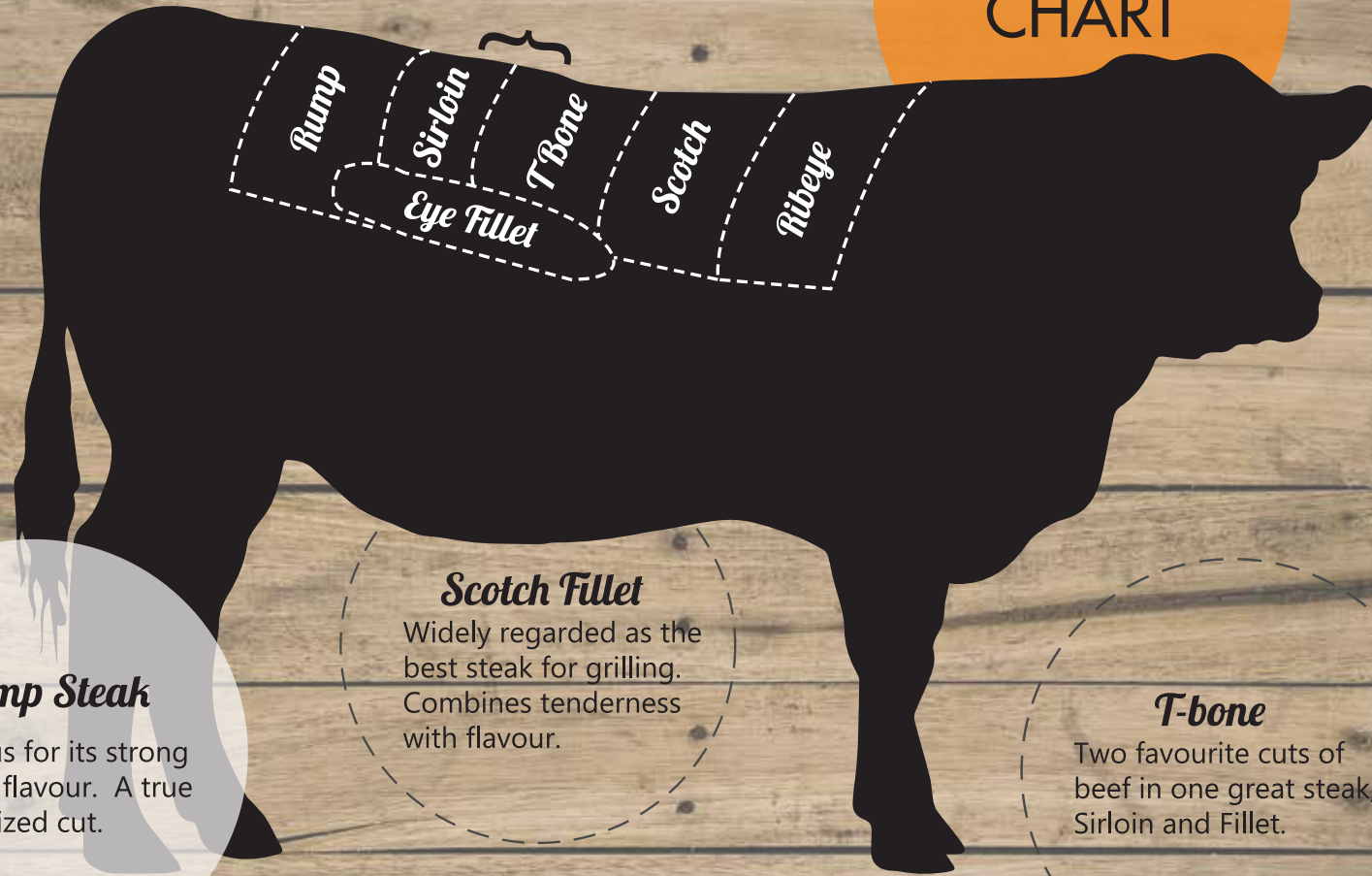
The USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) System

In the United States, there is a voluntary system of beef grading for the cattle industry. This system recognises that all beef isn't created equal and thus needs to be classified differently, allowing the consumers to choose the meat they desire, based on factors such as price and expected eating quality. All beef is sorted into distinct grades, which are largely determined by the amount of visible fat or marbling throughout the muscle tissue. As the system goes, the higher the degree of marbling, the more tender, juicy, and flavoursome the meat will be. Naturally enough, the higher the grade, the higher the price. Age also plays an important factor in the USDA grading system. The system designates that beef is most tender and flavoursome and has the most desirable texture when an animal is between eighteen and twenty-four months of age. In the context of your perfect steak, the top three grades are worthy of mention.

USDA Prime is the highest grade in the system. It contains the greatest degree of marbling and is made up of the prime or premium cuts of an animal. Less than 3 percent of all beef achieves the prized USDA prime classification. This, of course, makes it the most expensive.

USDA Choice has less marbling than Prime but is still considered of high quality. It's the most popular grade of beef because it contains sufficient marbling for taste and tenderness but doesn't have the high price tag of Prime. Choice makes up the largest grade of meat by volume, with just over 50 percent of all beef graded falling into this category.

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Preferred Cuts for Your Perfect Steak

Common Name Cuts	Brief Description	Tenderness	Flavour
Eye Fillet Fillet Steak Filet Mignon Tenderloin Long Fillet	The most tender and expensive cut of meat on the animal. It's the strip of muscle that runs along the sides of the spine. Fillet steak is typically very lean (when trimmed correctly) with some marbling throughout the body of the meat. Although small, it's considered the premium cut of beef and the most tender, although not necessarily the most flavoursome.	★★★★★	★★★★
Bone-In Rib Eye Boneless Rib Eye Cattleman Cutlet Cowboy Cutlet Cowboy Rib	Rib eye steaks are cut from the small end of the rib roast. These cuts are well marbled, tender, and full of flavour. When grilling on high heat, the marbling melts into the beef, enhancing the overall flavour. For barbecuing on the grill, it doesn't get any better. A Boneless rib eye steak has simply had the bone removed.	★★★★	★★★★★
Scotch Fillet Delmonico Steak	A very tasty, moist, and tender cut of beef with a bold and beefy flavour. You can always tell a Scotch by the seam of fat running through its centre. Scotch is regarded by many people as the best of both tenderness and flavor. I've noticed that many meat purveyors wrap Scotch fillets in cling film to make them more rounded. This is presumably so it looks more like an eye fillet.	★★★★	★★★★★
Rump Steak	Rump steak has a mixed reputation. Certainly it's one of the more flavoursome cuts, but at times it can be tough. It's recommended to check (where possible) the age of the animal when buying rump steak. Steers younger than thirty-six months are usually fine, but anything over this age is risky.	★★★	★★★★★
Sirloin Boneless Sirloin Porterhouse New Your Strip	Legend has it that the sirloin steak got its name from King James the first who loved beef loin so much that he declared it should be called "Sir Loin." It's known by a variety of names, dependant on how it's cut, either with or without a bone and in various thickness, with a New York strip having a thickness of about two inches.	★★★★	★★★★
T-Bone Steak	The ever popular T-bone steak is a classic, although it can be a little trickier to grill than some other cuts. The central T-shaped bone brings into a single cut two other cuts—the big side is the sirloin, and the bottom or small side is the eye fillet.	★★★★	★★★★
New York Cut Sydney Strip	Think of a New York cut as the strip loin portion of a T-bone or porterhouse. It's boneless and usually cut quite thick (two to three inches). I've seen it sold around my hometown as the Sydney Strip.	★★★★	★★★★

It's important to remember that different cuts can come from the same area of the beast. It just depends on how the animal is broken down and how the cuts are divided. It also depends on where you're from. I've noticed this varies not only between countries—such as the United States, England, and Australia—but it also varies between butchers and cattlemen.

The following chart is somewhat oversimplified, but it gives a good foundation for understanding the general region each particular cut is taken from. The video I made with master butcher Mick, in which we break down a side of beef, gives an extra dimension to understanding where each cut comes from.

PRIMAL CUT CHART

Rump

Sirloin

T-bone

Scotch

Ribeye

Eye Fillet

Scotch Fillet
Widely regarded as the best steak for grilling. Combines tenderness with flavour.

Rump Steak
Famous for its strong meaty flavour. A true man-sized cut.

T-bone
Two favourite cuts of beef in one great steak, Sirloin and Fillet.

Eye Fillet
Long Fillet, Filet Mignon, Tender Loin, Best served Medium Rare

Bone In Rib Eye
Also known as Cattleman's Cutlet or Cowboy Cutlet. Cut from the small end of the rib roast. For BBQing it doesn't get any better!

Sirloin
Christened by King Henry VIII of England who loved beef loin so much he declared it should be called "Sir Loin"

Selecting Your Steak

I can't give you a better tip than to buy your beef from a butcher, not the supermarket. I'm not saying supermarket meat is inferior; however, in my experience, when you go to a butcher, you have so much more control over what you get. For instance, if you look in the butcher shop window for a certain cut and can't see what you're looking for, most butchers are only too happy to go into the cool room and actually cut exactly what you want. For me, when I'm cooking my signature steak, which is an inch and a half thick, I usually need to ask for it to be cut to order. Seldom if ever have I seen cuts that thick prepackaged in the supermarket chiller.

I personally believe it's really good to know what **breed** of beef you're eating. I have a preference for Black Angus beef, but there are over eight hundred recognised cattle breeds in the world. Those most commonly considered of prime eating quality are Bos Taurus cattle, which include Angus, Murray Grey, Wagyu, and Hereford, to name some of the better

Your Perfect Steak

We know *Your Perfect Steak* is personal and that's why after test-cooking over 1000 steaks we're releasing the source code for you to create your very own *Signature Steaks*. Whether you're a medium-rare lover or you prefer well-done we all agree that the perfect steak must be something which is a passion to prepare and a pleasure to eat. Be aware, this is something 99% of people never master. By applying these techniques you are going to become a rock star of the grill, famous with your family and friends for serving the most delicious steaks they've ever eaten!

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