

# CANADIAN BEEF GRADES



IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND CANADIAN BEEF GRADES AND THEIR CRITERIA IN ORDER TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS WHEN PURCHASING BEEF. GRADING IS THE SYSTEM OF SORTING BEEF INTO CLASSES OF UNIFORM CHARACTERISTICS, SO PURCHASERS KNOW WHAT THEY ARE BUYING AND CAN HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE QUALITY OF THE PRODUCT. GRADING SHOULD ENSURE AN OPTIMUM EATING EXPERIENCE THROUGH GREATER CONSISTENCY IN THE EATING QUALITY OF SPECIFIC GRADES OF BEEF.

An independent third party, the Canadian Beef Grading Agency (CBGA) on a fee for service basis, delivers grading services to beef packers. The Federal Government, on recommendations from the beef industry, sets the beef grade standards for industry.

There are a significant number of factors considered in determining the Canadian “quality grades.” Canada A, Canada AA, Canada AAA and Canada Prime are measured and graded against the following criteria:

## MARBLING

Marbling is the fine white flecks of fat running through the lean meat. Marbling enhances the eating quality of beef by increasing juiciness and flavour. The amount of marbling in the rib eye defines the minimum standard for the top quality grades.

## MATURITY

The maturity or age of the animal is an important consideration because of its relationship to tenderness. Only youthful animals meet the criteria for Canada’s quality grades (youthful carcasses are produced from cattle generally less than 24 months of age, but no more than 30 months of age as determined by physiological criteria).

## MEAT COLOUR

The meat colour must be bright red. This criterion identifies and excludes “dark cutters” (beef that has turned a dark colour due to increased level of pH, often associated with pre-processing stress).

## FAT COLOUR

Fat colour must be firm and white. This criterion ensures that dairy cattle (which have yellow fat) are excluded from the quality grades.

## MEAT TEXTURE

Firm muscle texture is associated with optimal eating quality and cooking consistency. The minimum standard for Canada A grades is firm muscle and the meat must be fine grained which ensures that beef in these quality grades is of the highest eating quality.

## MUSCLING

Muscling is a yield criteria – how much lean meat will be available, in relation to the overall carcass weight. The minimum standard of muscling for Canada quality grades must measure as good to excellent.

## CANADA AND US GRADING STANDARDS

Canada adopted the US marbling standards in 1996; the US is Canada’s largest trading partner for beef and consistent standards ensure that beef is fairly traded. The minimum marbling standards used for USDA Prime (slightly abundant), Choice (small) and Select (slight) are the same minimum standards used in Canada to segregate the youthful quality carcasses into Canada Prime, AAA and AA respectively. Canada’s quality grades, usually AAA, are sometimes further segregated in an effort to better consistently deliver similar marbling specifications. For example, branded programs may state Small<sup>50</sup>, which means that the minimum marbling score for the brand is 50% up the Small third of AAA. Modest<sup>0</sup>, another popular specification, will require a minimum marbling score of Modest, excluding the Small third of AAA.

		CANADIAN GRADE	COMPARABLE USDA MARBLING GRADE
	ABUNDANT		
	MODERATELY ABUNDANT	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT MARBLING	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT MARBLING
	SLIGHTLY ABUNDANT		
	MODERATE		
	MODEST	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SMALL MARBLING	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SMALL MARBLING
	SMALL		
	SLIGHT	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SLIGHT MARBLING	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS SLIGHT MARBLING
	TRACE	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS TRACE MARBLING	MINIMUM REQUIREMENT IS TRACE MARBLING

## OTHER COUNTRIES

Grading systems used around the world vary based on each country’s goals and objectives for its beef production system and the markets they supply. Not all countries grade for quality; there can be great differences between grading systems and the definition of quality will vary between countries. Some countries may not be concerned about marbling, meat and fat colour or age of the animal – characteristics that are key to a quality product and satisfied guests.

The Canadian Beef Grading system has been developed so that consumers of Canadian beef can have confidence in the quality and consistency of the product they purchase.

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q. “The box I have doesn’t say anything about a grade – now what do I look for?”**

Any products not marked with a Canada Grade name must be labelled “UNGRADED” or bear the grade designation of the country of origin (there is no requirement for the name of the country of origin to appear). This applies for all beef products down to an individual piece size of 125 cm<sup>3</sup> (5 cm x 5 cm x 5 cm or 2" x 2" x 2") and would include most portion controlled steak products. If the label doesn’t give an official Canada Grade name or the grade designation from the country of origin or the word “Ungraded,” it is not properly labelled. Make sure you question your supplier. If the box you have does not comply with the regulations it should be identified to the Canadian Beef Grading Agency (see below for contact information).

**Q. “There’s a bunch of information on the box written in felt pen. Is this ok?”**

According to section 7.12 of the Meat Hygiene Manual only the weight may be hand written on a label or box. All other information must be pre-printed or applied to a shipping container by means of a printed pressure-sensitive label or applied by on-line printing. Handwritten descriptions, including grade designations are not acceptable. If any required information is not presented as noted above, question the supplier.

**Q. “The printing on my box says “Canada AA or higher,” does this mean I am getting AAA beef in my carton?”**

You should be aware that although the carton might be labelled “Canada Grade AA or higher,” it does not guarantee there is higher-grade product in the carton, only that there *may* be higher-grade product included. Do not assume that you are getting a higher quality product than you paid for.

**Q. “I buy my beef from a local commercial butcher – some of their product isn’t labelled at all. What should I do?”**

Currently commercial butchers – those companies operating with city or municipal food handling permits and not provincially or federally inspected – are not required to use the same labelling practises as provincially or federally inspected facilities. It is recommended that all beef be purchased from approved sources. Ask your supplier about their food safety and labelling practises.

**Q. “Why do I have to be so vigilant? Isn’t someone in government responsible for ensuring all the meat I buy is properly labelled, no matter who I buy it from?”**

The industry is structured in such a way that there is no ongoing monitoring of boxed beef products, with the exception of establishments

where grading services are provided. The industry monitors itself and buyers must take responsibility to insist on label accuracy in a “buyer beware” approach. It is important to know what questions to ask and what to look for to ensure the products you buy for your guests are the quality you want. Ask your supplier about the grade of beef you purchase.

**Q. “I am not buying a full box of product so I will not see any original box labels. How do I know what I am getting?”**

Unfortunately there is no requirement at this time to put the grade label on each vacuumed package of product. It is important that you ask for written verification from your supplier as to grade, country of origin, whether the product has been previously frozen and other pertinent details such as trim level.

**Q. “There’s a lot of liquid in the vacuum bag of beef I received – is this normal?”**

Occasionally, previously frozen beef is misrepresented as fresh. Customers who have ordered and are paying for fresh product want to make sure that is what they are getting. If there is an unusual amount of liquid (purge) in the vacuum bag, confirm with your supplier that the product has not been previously frozen and that it has been delivered under proper conditions (i.e. a refrigerated truck).

## FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CANADIAN BEEF GRADING STANDARDS:

Visit the Canadian Beef Grading Agency website at [www.beefgradingagency.ca](http://www.beefgradingagency.ca) and follow the links to Grading.

OR – visit the Beef Information Centre website at [www.beefinfo.org](http://www.beefinfo.org) and follow the links to Foodservice / Beef Cuts / Grading. A copy of the fact sheet entitled “Canadian Beef Grading” (for Foodservice) is also available for downloading free of charge from the Beef Information Centre website by following the links to Resource Order Centre / Foodservice Resources.

To lodge a confidential complaint on a suspected case of misrepresentation of Canadian beef please contact the Canadian Beef Grading Agency (contact information follows). All reports are kept confidential by CBGA. You will not be identified to the supplier when CBGA investigates.

## THE CANADIAN BEEF GRADING AGENCY

310 – 6715 8th Street NE, Calgary, Alberta T2E 7H7

TELEPHONE 403 274.0301 FACSIMILE 1 888 582.3888

EMAIL [cbga@telusplanet.net](mailto:cbga@telusplanet.net)

[www.beefinfo.org/foodservice](http://www.beefinfo.org/foodservice)

**Beef** Information Centre



# CANADIAN BEEF LABELLING FACT SHEET

## BUYING CANADIAN BEEF

A LOT OF BEEF IS IMPORTED INTO CANADA EVERY YEAR – \$469 MILLION IN 2005 ALONE! COMPETITION IS A GOOD THING. HOWEVER, THERE HAVE BEEN SITUATIONS REPORTED WHERE IMPORTED BEEF IS MISREPRESENTED AS CANADIAN. TO BE AN INFORMED BUYER, YOU NEED TO KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT FRAUD. REMEMBER, KNOWLEDGE IS YOUR BEST DEFENCE.

## MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND LABELLING REQUIREMENTS.

### PRODUCT OF CANADA

The words “Product of Canada” stamped on the box does not mean the product in the box is from Canada – it simply means that the beef has undergone some form of processing in Canada. The product in the box may be Canadian but it could also be imported beef that has been “reworked” (i.e. undergone trimming or portioning) in Canada.

### CANADIAN FEDERAL OR PROVINCIAL INSPECTION STAMP

The Canadian Federal or Provincial Inspection stamp on the label or box doesn't mean the beef inside is Canadian – it just means that the product has been inspected and approved at a Canadian plant as meeting a standard set of health and safety guidelines under the supervision of the CFIA. The stamp will also have a number listed on the bottom that refers to the plant at which the product was processed. For a list of establishments and their associated numbers, go to the CFIA website at: [www.inspection.gc.ca](http://www.inspection.gc.ca).



## IF YOU WANT TO BE SURE THE BEEF YOU BUY IS CANADIAN, WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR? LOOK FOR THE CANADIAN GRADE.

### THE CANADIAN GRADING SYSTEM

The Canadian Beef Grading Agency (CBGA) is a private, non-profit corporation. They have been accredited by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to deliver grading services for beef in Canada. The Federal Government, based on recommendations from industry, sets the grade

standards. Only Canadian beef that has been processed in a federally or provincially inspected facility can be assigned a Canadian grade name by the CBGA. Grading is not mandatory.

One sure way to know that your beef is Canadian is to ensure the official Canada Grade name is clearly printed on the label. To be “official” the Canada Grade name must be noted as follows; it must be shown in these words with or without the maple leaf:



CANADA AAA OR HIGHER  
CANADA AAA



CANADA A OR HIGHER  
CANADA A



CANADA AA OR HIGHER  
CANADA AA



CANADA PRIME

These grade labels refer to Canada's top grades, which have minimum marbling requirements, and set characteristics for maturity, muscling, meat and fat colour and texture.

Any variation on these names as listed above is not allowed. For example “Angus AA,” “Canadian A,” “AAA,” “Certified A or higher,” “Premium AAA,” “Mucky Lake Top Quality AAA Beef” are not allowable grade designations. Remember that the colour of an animal's hide, or designation of a special name or program, is not a grade. If you find mislabelled product, question the supplier and report the suspected misrepresentation to the CBGA.



# INSPECTION AND LABELLING OF CANADIAN BEEF

The safety of Canadian beef has always been the highest priority for all sectors of the industry.

The development of on-farm food safety programs like “Quality Starts Here,” as well as a mandatory system of cattle identification managed by the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency, ensures that the commitment to food safety starts at the pasture gate. Inspection of each carcass as well as laboratory-based testing of meat products is carried out by veterinarians, scientists and other professionals employed by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The implementation of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems at all federally inspected plants, as well as adoption of anti-microbial treatments such as steam pasteurization, have made significant contributions to the strong safety record of Canadian beef products.

Restaurant operators should check with their beef suppliers to see what kind of food safety controls they have in place. Ask if they have a HACCP or other food safety system at their plant, and determine what types of controls are in place to control potentially harmful bacteria. These are important considerations for your business and the safety of your guests.

## THE FACTS ON BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPHY (BSE)

BSE is a fatal disease of the central nervous system of beef and dairy cattle. It is also called “Mad Cow Disease” because of the symptoms infected cattle often exhibit including difficulty walking and behavioural changes.

The safety and quality of Canadian beef continues to be among the best in the world. Extensive safeguards to control and eliminate any BSE in the Canadian herd have been in place for years and continue to be enhanced in accordance with the best available science.

The safety of Canada’s food supply remains protected through the removal of specified risk material (SRM) from all cattle processed for human consumption. SRM is cattle tissue that has been shown in infected cattle to contain concentrated levels of the BSE agent. This measure is internationally recognized as the most effective means to protect the safety of food from BSE. Other safeguards include:

- Controls on importing cattle, beef and beef products to prevent exposure to BSE
- Surveillance of cattle for BSE to determine the prevalence of BSE in Canadian cattle
- Feed ban to stop the spread of BSE (recent regulatory enhancements to Canada’s feed ban will exclude SRM from all animal feeds, pet foods and fertilizers)
- Canada’s cattle identification program
- In the federal inspection system all animals are examined by trained meat inspectors before they ever enter the food supply

For more information on BSE, visit the website: [www.bseinfo.ca](http://www.bseinfo.ca)

## GOVERNMENT INSPECTION

There are two levels of inspection, federal and provincial. The level of inspection is determined by the designation of the processing facility. The role of inspection is to oversee the product to ensure that health and safety guidelines have been met.



## FEDERAL INSPECTION

In Canada, federal inspection is required for any processing facility that is involved in inter-provincial or export trade of meat. Federal inspection is the responsibility of Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).

The Inspection stamp on cartons means that the product has been inspected and approved as meeting a standard set of health and safety guidelines under the supervision of the CFIA. It also indicates that the product has been prepared in federally inspected facilities and meets guidelines for both Canadian and international trade. This stamp is not an indication of grade or country of origin; it does not mean the product inside the carton is Canadian. The stamp will also have a number listed on the bottom that refers to the plant at which the product was processed.

## PROVINCIAL INSPECTION

Inspection of provincially registered plants is the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Health, depending on the province. Provincial guidelines will vary depending upon the standard set by the individual province. Provincially inspected meat may only be distributed within the province of inspection. It is important to ask specific questions of these suppliers as to the food safety standards and procedures that are in place to ensure a safe supply.

## LABELLING

An informed purchaser must know what information to look for on a label. In addition to having an inspection legend, the label must also identify the grade. The Canada grade name must appear clearly on the box: Canada A, Canada AA, Canada AAA or Canada Prime. The expression “or higher” is also permitted if the box contains more than one grade. If the grade is not identified, the box must be labeled “ungraded.”

## GRADES ON IMPORTED BEEF

Beef that enters Canada from outside Canadian boundaries is inspected but does not have to be graded. The Canadian Grading Regulations require that the containers of all beef imported to Canada must have the grade from the country of origin identified or be marked as “ungraded beef.”

For more information, please check the following websites:

Canadian Beef Grading Agency [www.beefgradingagency.ca](http://www.beefgradingagency.ca)  
Canadian Food Inspection Agency [www.inspection.gc.ca](http://www.inspection.gc.ca)  
Beef Information Centre [www.beefinfo.org/foodservice](http://www.beefinfo.org/foodservice)

