

# Guide to Great Steaks for the Grill

BY THE FINE COOKING EDITORS

What says summer better than a thick, juicy steak sizzling over a fire? For entertaining, grilling steaks sets a relaxed mood yet makes your guests feel special. And on weeknights, a simply grilled steak is a quick route to a treat-yourself-right supper. But which cut to buy? And how to grill it? Not to worry. From shopping tips to judging doneness, this guide will teach you how to grill mouthwatering steaks every time.

## Choosing your cut

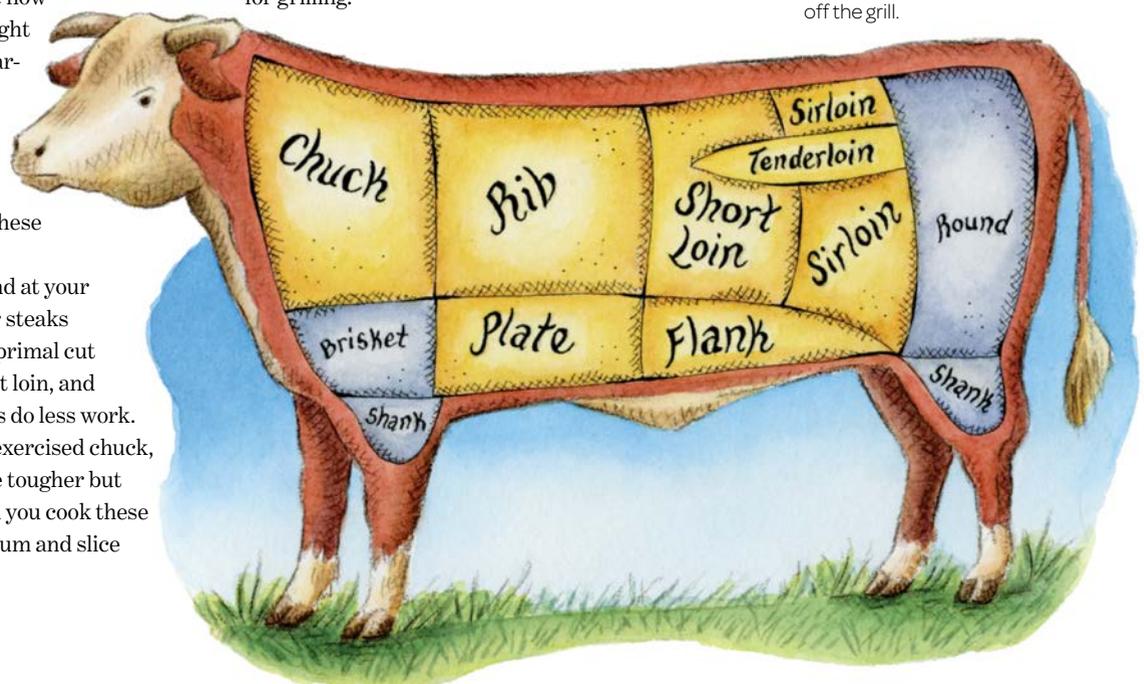
### Anatomy of a steer

Beef labels can be confusing. The name of the cut can vary from one market—and region—to the next (see the chart inside). But if you understand where the "primal cuts" come from on a steer, you'll be better able to decipher supermarket labels, determine how tender and flavorful a steak might be, and decide how to cook a particular cut.

Wholesalers break down steer carcasses into nine sections, or primal cuts (the tenderloin is part of the sirloin). These cuts are then broken down further into the retail cuts found at your supermarket. The most tender steaks come from the cow's back—in primal cut terminology, from the rib, short loin, and sirloin—because these muscles do less work. Steaks from the more heavily exercised chuck, plate, and flank primal cuts are tougher but have more beefy oomph. When you cook these steaks to medium rare or medium and slice

them thinly across the grain, they're great for the grill and easy on your wallet, too. Cuts from the brisket, shank, and round are the toughest and leanest of the lot; they're best left for other cooking methods like braising or roasting, not for grilling.

Steaks from the yellow sections are good for grilling; cuts from the blue areas are better off the grill.



# Understanding labels

As the demand for safer, sustainably raised beef grows, we're seeing more language relating to farming and production methods—or how the animal was raised—on beef packages. That's the good news. The bad news is that some of these terms have loose standards and are not verified by anyone other than the producer. (If the beef in your market doesn't carry any of these terms, tell the meat manager you'd like to see more options.)

**Grass-fed** All cattle eat a natural diet of grass at the beginning of their lives. The question is whether the animal was switched to grain to fatten up before slaughter, or whether it continued to eat grass and hay throughout its life. From a health standpoint, exclusively grass-fed beef has more nutrients and less saturated fat, lower rates of the dangerous *E. coli* O157:H7 bacteria, and no risk of mad cow disease. From a flavor perspective, it's leaner than conventional beef, and it's less forgiving if overcooked; aim for rare or medium rare.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grass-fed standards (look for the "process verified" shield on beef packages) specify a grass-only diet as well as continuous access to pasture during the growing season. However, there is no restriction on the use of antibiotics, hormones, or pesticides, and the program is voluntary, which means a producer may use "grass-fed" on its labels without verification. Look for terms like "100% grass-fed" or "grass-finished" or for another third-party verifier, such as the American Grassfed Association (whose standards are stricter than those of the USDA).

**Free-range or free-roaming** These terms have no legal definition when applied to beef (though they do for poultry). While they suggest, at minimum, that the animal had access to the outdoors, there are no standards that producers need to follow.

**Organic** Beef that carries the USDA organic logo has met the department's standards, which prohibit the use of growth hormones, antibiotics, genetically modified feed, and animal byproducts, among other things. The standards do not require a grass-only diet; the animal may be fed organic grain.

**Raised without antibiotics** This implies just what it says: that antibiotics were not given to the cows. The producer must submit documentation supporting the claim, but unless otherwise noted, it isn't independently verified.

**No hormones administered** This suggests that the animal received no growth-stimulating hormones. The producer must submit documentation supporting the claim, but unless otherwise noted, it isn't third-party verified.

**Natural** As defined by the USDA, "natural" or "all-natural" beef has been minimally processed and contains no preservatives or artificial ingredients. Since virtually all fresh beef conforms to these standards, the term has no real significance.

**Naturally raised** The USDA is working on a new standard for naturally raised beef that would prohibit the use of hormones, antibiotics, and animal byproducts but might not address other production concerns, such as animal welfare, diet, or access to pasture. Once the final standard is released, you may start to see this term accompanied by the USDA "process verified" shield. However, the program will be voluntary, so producers may use the term even without verification.

## The grading system

The USDA evaluates beef quality based on how much marbling (flecks of intramuscular fat) is present, along with other qualities, such as age, that correlate to tenderness, juiciness, and flavor. Not all beef is graded, so look for the USDA grading shield to know what you're buying.

**Prime** beef is tops. It has abundant marbling and cooks up beautifully. Only 2% to 3% of all beef is labeled prime. If you're willing to pay a premium, you can buy prime beef online or at high-end butcher shops.

**Choice** comes next and is also very high quality, with good marbling. It's often available in supermarkets, but there is wide variability within this grade. Ask the butcher to guide you to the best steaks on offer.

**Select** is the third grade. It's leaner and has very little marbling, so it won't be as juicy or tender when cooked, especially if cooked beyond medium rare.

# Know your steaks

Cut, alternative names	What it looks like	Description	Cost	Cooking tips
<b>FROM THE SHORT LOIN (back)</b>				
<b>TENDERLOIN STEAK</b> filet steak, filet mignon, tournedos, filet de boeuf		These very tender special-occasion steaks are cut from the long, narrow tenderloin muscle. When cut from the smaller end, they're usually 1 to 2 inches thick and 1½ to 2 inches in diameter and called filet mignon. Tournedos are cut from the wider end and are thinner and larger. Figure one steak per person.	\$\$\$\$	Good match for rubs, sauces, or flavored butters.
<b>T-BONE</b>		A carnivore's delight, this steak consists of two muscles separated by a T-shaped bone. Cut from the front end of the short loin, the larger muscle is the juicy, flavorful top loin, and the smaller muscle is part of the tenderloin. Look for ample marbling. Steaks will weigh 1½ to 2 lb. and serve 3 to 4.	\$\$\$	Excellent with rubs, sauces, or flavored butters.
<b>PORTERHOUSE</b>		Essentially the same as a T-bone except that it has a larger tenderloin muscle and a smaller top loin muscle than the T-bone (it's cut from the rear of the short loin, where the tenderloin is bigger). Ample marbling. Magnificent when cut to a luxuriously thick 2 inches, which can weigh 2 lb. and serve 3 to 4.	\$\$\$	The tenderloin muscle cooks quickly, so keep it over lower heat. To carve, cut the two muscles off the bone, slice, and then reassemble so everyone can sample from both sides.
<b>TOP LOIN STEAK</b> <b>Boneless:</b> strip steak, Kansas City steak, New York strip steak, ambassador steak, veiny steak, hotel steak, boneless club, and more  <b>Bone-in:</b> New York strip loin, shell steak, strip steak, club steak, club sirloin steak, Delmonico steak		Think of these popular steaks as a T-bone or porterhouse with the tenderloin section removed, leaving you with the very tender and juicy top loin muscle. May be bone-in or boneless (shown). Look for ample marbling. Ideal thickness is 1½ inches, giving you a ¾- to 1-lb. steak serving 2 to 3.	\$\$\$	Firm enough to take a marinade but also great with sauces or flavored butters.

The names of retail cuts vary from one meat counter to the next. Furthermore, some names can apply to two very different cuts. When in doubt, ask the butcher.

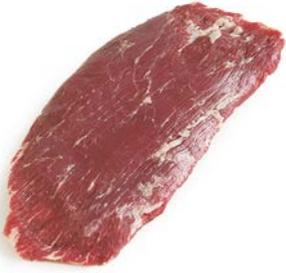
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# Know your steaks (continued)

Cut, alternative names	What it looks like	Description	Cost	Cooking tips
<b>FROM THE RIB</b>				
<p><b>RIB-EYE &amp; RIB STEAK</b></p> <p><b>Boneless:</b> Spencer steak, Delmonico steak, beauty steak, entrecote, market steak</p> <p><b>Bone-in:</b> rib steak</p>		May be boneless (shown) or bone-in. Ask for cuts from the small end of the rib (closer to the short loin), where the tender eye muscle is larger, rather than from the large end (near the chuck), where there are tougher shoulder muscles. Should have ample marbling. Exceptionally tender and juicy. Ideal thickness is at least 1½ inches, serving 2 to 3.	\$\$\$	Excellent when paired with a dry rub, marinade, or sauce.
<b>FROM THE SIRLOIN (hip)</b>				
<p><b>TOP SIRLOIN</b></p> <p>sirloin butt steak, London broil, top sirloin butt, center cut</p>		The sirloin consists of several muscles, and steaks cut from this area, while flavorful, vary in tenderness and marbling. Top sirloin is the most desirable (those labeled simply “sirloin” are tougher). Look for steaks at least 1½ inches thick, serving 2 to 3.	\$\$	Marinades and rubs can help counter the steak’s leanness. To carve, slice thinly or portion into smaller individual steaks.
<p><b>TRI-TIP STEAK</b></p> <p>culotte, triangle steak, triangle tip, Newport steaks, sirloin bottom butt</p>		Cut from the triangle-shaped tri-tip muscle in the slightly tougher bottom sirloin area, these small, lean steaks are prized for their great beefy flavor. Tri-tips can come in packages of 2 or 3 and are typically 1 to 1¼ inches thick. Figure one steak per person.	\$\$	Excellent with spice rubs and marinades; slice thinly across the grain.
<b>FROM THE CHUCK (shoulder)</b>				
<p><b>CHUCK-EYE STEAK</b></p> <p>boneless chuck fillet steak, boneless steak, bottom chuck, center-cut chuck steak</p>		This boneless steak, found under the steer’s back bone closest to the rib section, has good beefy flavor and is relatively tender, though it may also have a fair amount of fat and gristle. Steaks can weigh from 1¼ to 2½ lb. and serve 2 to 4.	\$	Good choice for marinades; slice very thinly.
<p><b>TOP BLADE STEAK</b></p> <p>flatiron steak, lifter steak, book steak, petite steak, top chuck steak, butler steak, chicken steak</p>		A flavorful steak from the chuck, this cut is quite tender yet moderately priced, making it an excellent value. Figure one 1¼- to 1½-inch-thick steak per person.	\$	Highly recommended for marinades; remove the line of gristle running down the middle either before or after cooking; slice very thinly.

Chart continues on next page

# Know your steaks (continued)

Cut, alternative names	What it looks like	Description	Cost	Cooking tips
<b>FROM THE FLANK &amp; PLATE (underbelly)</b>				
<b>FLANK STEAK</b> London broil, jiffy steak, flank steak filet		From the underbelly of the steer, flank is a lean cut with a visible longitudinal grain that absorbs marinades well. It's known for its beefy flavor and firm texture. Oblong in shape with a thinner, tapered end. One steak weighs 1 to 2 lb., serving 3 to 4.	\$\$	Superb with marinades. Slice thinly on the bias (and across the grain) to increase tenderness. Keep thinner end over less-intense heat and flip occasionally for even cooking.
<b>HANGER STEAK</b> hanging tenderloin, flap meat, butcher's steak, butcher's tenderloin		This cut "hangs" from the last rib just below the tenderloin. It's not often found in supermarkets (there's only one per steer, and butchers like to keep it for themselves), but this flavorful, tender, and juicy cut is worth seeking out. A 1½- to 2-lb. hanger steak will feed 3 to 4.	\$\$	Good for marinating. Ask for the central nerve to be removed, which will result in two smaller steaks, or grill whole and cut around the nerve during carving. Grill briefly over high heat and avoid cooking beyond medium rare. Slice across the grain.
<b>SKIRT STEAK</b> Philadelphia steak, fajitas meat		From the plate, this distinctive looking steak is the long, thin diaphragm muscle. It has a fairly coarse grain, which runs crosswise rather than lengthwise (as with flank steak). Though it's sometimes confused with flank, it's fattier, more tender, and offers even more beefy flavor. 1½ to 2 lb. of skirt steak will feed 3 to 4.	\$\$	Ideal for marinades. Grill quickly over high heat, just a few minutes per side. Keep to medium rare to avoid drying out. Carve across the grain, lengthwise.

Photos: Scott Phillips; illustration, Jennifer Thernes

## WATCH THE CLOCK, BUT BE FLEXIBLE

Thickness of steak	Total grilling time, high heat	Total grilling time, medium-high heat
½ inch	3 to 4 min. for medium rare; 4 to 5 min. for medium	4 to 5 min. for medium rare; 5 to 6 min. for medium
1 inch	6 to 7 min. for medium rare; 7 to 8 min. for medium	8 to 9 min. for medium rare; 9 to 10 min. for medium
1½ inches	10 to 12 min. for medium rare; 12 to 14 min. for medium	11 to 13 min. for medium rare; 13 to 15 min. for medium
2 inches	n/a (steak will burn before it's cooked through)	18 to 22 min. for medium rare; 22 to 24 min. for medium

*Keep in mind that lean steaks don't have as much buffer against overcooking and that the second side always cooks faster than the first.*

## Grilling done right

**Create a two-level fire** with areas of higher and lower heat. Then you can move the steaks to a cooler spot if they're cooking too quickly or if there are flare-ups.

**To judge the heat of your fire**, hold your outstretched hand 1 to 2 inches above the grate. If you can keep your hand there for about 1 second, you've got high heat; about 2 seconds means medium high.

**To prevent sticking**, clean the grates with a wire grill brush as the grill heats up. Close the lid when you're done grilling, for easier cleanup; the trapped heat helps burn off food residue.

**Keep the lid on.** This helps control flare-ups, won't affect the sear, and helps the steaks cook quickly and evenly.

**Flip the steaks just once** (except for flank). The less you move them, the more easily they will develop a nice caramelized crust.



## Slice it up

*When slicing steak—especially the leaner cuts from the tougher parts of the steer—always cut across the grain for the most tender result. This means cutting perpendicular to the long parallel muscle fibers in the steak, so that the fibers in each cut piece are shorter and easier to chew.*

## 6 tips for perfect medium rare

- 1 Before you grill, remove the chill.** Take the steaks out of the fridge about 30 minutes before cooking so they'll cook evenly and quickly.
- 2 Go ahead and touch.** With practice, you can gauge doneness by pressing on the meat. Rare feels quite soft, medium rare is slightly resilient, and medium has a bit more spring. If it's firm, you've overshot into medium-well or well-done territory.
- 3 If you're not sure, take a peek.** Although cutting into the steak allows some juices to escape, it isn't the worst offense. Use the tip of a paring knife and cut near the center of the steak for a view of what's happening inside.
- 4 Pull the steak off just before it reaches your target doneness.** Meat continues to cook a little after it's off the grill so be sure to allow for this "carryover cooking" when you're checking doneness.
- 5 For thicker cuts, use a digital instant-read thermometer.** Steaks should be at least 1½ inches thick to get an accurate reading. For rare, remove the steak at 120° to 125°F; for medium rare, aim for 125° to 130°F; and for medium, 130° to 135°F. See inside for grilling times.
- 6 Let it rest before you carve.** When you cook meat, the juices converge in the center. A 5- to 10-minute rest on a cutting board allows that moisture to redistribute, and your steak will be juicier for it.

# Flavor boosters

## Marinades

**Method:** Whisk all ingredients in a small bowl. If there is sugar in the marinade, make sure it's dissolved. Combine the marinade and meat and refrigerate, turning occasionally. Marinate steaks, depending on their thickness, at least 1 hour and up to 12 hours. Pat the meat dry before grilling.

### BALSAMIC & HERB MARINADE

Yields a scant 1 cup, enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
- 1½ Tbs. roasted garlic purée (or 1 Tbs. minced fresh garlic)
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh sage or fresh oregano

### BOURBON & BROWN SUGAR MARINADE

Yields about 1 cup, enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- ½ cup soy sauce
- ⅓ cup bourbon or other whiskey
- ⅓ cup firmly packed brown sugar, preferably dark
- 1 Tbs. Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp. hot sauce, such as Tabasco

### SOY, GINGER & GARLIC MARINADE

Yields about 1 cup, enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- 6 Tbs. soy sauce
- ¼ cup sugar
- 8 large cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 10 scallions (white part only), finely minced (about 2 Tbs.)
- 4 tsp. sake or rice wine
- 4 tsp. finely chopped fresh ginger
- 4 tsp. Asian sesame oil

Bourbon & Brown Sugar  
Marinated Flank Steak



## Spice & Herb Rubs

**Method:** Combine all ingredients in a small bowl. Apply rubs just before grilling, or for more flavor, rub the mix into the meat and refrigerate for several hours before grilling. You can store dry spice rubs in the pantry for 2 to 3 weeks. Store rubs with fresh ingredients in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.

### TEX-MEX RUB

Yields about ¼ cup, enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 1 Tbs. cumin seeds, toasted and ground
- 1 Tbs. minced garlic
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh oregano
- 1½ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- ¼ tsp. cayenne

### MIDDLE EASTERN STEAK RUB

Yields ½ cup, enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- 3 Tbs. Aleppo pepper or 2 Tbs. Hungarian hot paprika
- 2 Tbs. ground coriander
- 1 Tbs. ground cumin
- 2 tsp. dried mint
- 1 tsp. olive oil
- ½ tsp. ground nutmeg
- ½ tsp. ground allspice (or ¼ tsp. each ground cloves and ground cinnamon)

Rib-Eye with Star Anise & Rosemary Rub



### STAR ANISE & ROSEMARY RUB

Yields 2½ Tbs., enough for 1½ to 2 lb. meat.

- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh rosemary
- 2 tsp. kosher salt
- 2 tsp. olive oil
- 1 tsp. ground star anise or ½ tsp. five-spice powder
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

## Flavored Butters

**Method:** Combine all the ingredients in a small bowl. Use immediately or use plastic wrap to shape the butter into a log, tightening the ends as if it were a sausage. The butters will keep in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks or in the freezer for a month.

### ROQUEFORT BUTTER

*Yields about ¾ cup, enough for 12 steaks.*

- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- ½ cup (8 Tbs.) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 2 oz. Roquefort cheese, crumbled
- ½ Tbs. red-wine vinegar
- ½ tsp. fresh thyme
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

**Note:** Cook the shallot and garlic in 1 Tbs. of the butter in a small skillet over medium heat until soft; let cool. Combine with the remaining ingredients.

### LIME-CILANTRO BUTTER

*Yields about ½ cup, enough for 8 steaks.*

- ½ cup (8 Tbs.) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tsp. finely grated lime zest
- 1 tsp. green Tabasco or other jalapeño hot sauce
- Kosher salt to taste

### BASIL BUTTER

*Yields about ½ cup, enough for 8 steaks.*

- ½ cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh basil
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- ½ tsp. finely grated lemon zest
- Kosher salt and ground white pepper to taste



*Basil Butter*



*Flank Steak with Chunky Tomato-Basil Vinaigrette*

## Sauces & Salsas

### CHUNKY TOMATO-BASIL VINAIGRETTE

*Yields a generous 2 cups.*

- 1¼ to 1½ lb. fresh ripe plum tomatoes, seeded and cut into ½-inch dice (2 cups)
- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup red-wine vinegar
- 1 large or 2 medium shallots, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup lightly packed chopped fresh basil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Toss all the ingredients in a medium bowl.

### ANCHO CHILE HARISSA

*Yields 1 cup.*

- 5 ancho chiles, seeded, stemmed, soaked in hot water until soft (about 1 hour), and drained
- ½ cup olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 Tbs. cold water
- 2 tsp. soy sauce
- 2 tsp. balsamic vinegar
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. ground coriander
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

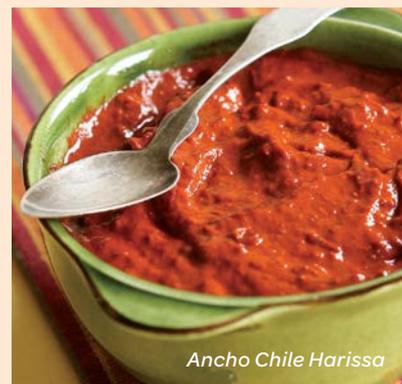
Combine all the ingredients in a food processor and purée until very smooth.

### PESTO-STYLE SALSA VERDE

*Yields 1 cup.*

- 1 cup packed fresh flat-leaf parsley, blanched in boiling salted water, cooled, and squeezed dry
- ½ cup packed fresh basil, blanched in boiling salted water, cooled, and squeezed dry
- ½ cup packed fresh cilantro
- ¼ cup toasted blanched almonds
- 2 medium cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
- ¼ tsp. dried red chile flakes
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ¾ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 Tbs. white-wine vinegar

Mix all ingredients except the oil and vinegar in a food processor. With the processor running, slowly pour the olive oil into the feed tube and blend until the mixture becomes a thick purée. Stir in the vinegar just before serving.



*Ancho Chile Harissa*