

Meat Grades and Prepackaging

consumers' reactions to grades of meat and prepackaging studied in Berkeley survey of retail buyers' preferences

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The majority of the 1,125 buyers of the meat used in households interviewed in a survey of 15 large food stores in Berkeley preferred the U.S. Good grade over the U.S. Choice grade—when confronted with a sirloin steak and a rib roast of each grade—even though the prices were the same.

Berkeley buyers, like those studied in other areas, apparently do not recognize the characteristics of a piece of meat sufficiently well to name its grade or enumerate most of the grade names correctly. A very large proportion of the Berkeley buyers bought some or all of their meat in stores which labeled and advertised their meat by grades—especially those stores that carried U.S. Choice only. The extent of the use of grade names on meat in the area studied was indicated by the fact that 70% of the buyers said they had noticed grade names on meat.

About 16% of the buyers said they looked for the grade in determining quality. Only 12% used the U.S. grade names correctly. Over 10% said they bought Choice, less than 1% said they bought Good, and 1.7% said either Choice or Good. Yet 54% to 59% chose the U.S. Good steak or roast over the U.S. Choice.

The buyers' unfamiliarity with grade names and their inability to recognize the grade of a piece of meat was very evident when—after they had indicated a preference for either the U.S. Choice or U.S. Good steak or roast displayed before them—two thirds admitted that they did not know the grade of either the steaks or the roasts.

About 10% of all the buyers named the U.S. Choice grade steaks and roasts correctly, but only 7% named the U.S. Good steaks and roasts. However, an additional 5% identified the U.S. Choice as Prime, AA, or Top, indicating that they thought the meat was high quality even though they could not give its correct grade name. About 2% thought the U.S. Good was B or Medium grade. On the other hand, between 3% and 4% thought that the U.S. Good steaks and roasts were either Prime, AA, or Top grade. From 6% to 7% identified the U.S. Good steaks and roasts as A grade.

Even though two thirds of the buyers could not identify the grade of the steaks

and roasts displayed before them, 20% said they knew grade names. Yet only half of these—about 10% of the total buyers—named Choice and Good as grade names, and 3% named letter grades. The remainder named various combinations of letter grades, packers' brands, and the like.

This study seems to indicate that only about 10% or less of the buyers interviewed were familiar enough with U.S. grades to identify correctly cuts of meat by grade. Another 10% were able to give Choice and Good as grade names but they were not able to relate these names to the qualities of meat.

Prepackaged Meat

Over one half or 56% of the 1,125 buyers interviewed usually bought unpackaged meat, 21% usually bought the prepackaged, and 23% usually bought both the prepackaged and the unpackaged meat. The practice of buying prepackaged or unpackaged meat seemed to have no relation to the age of the buyer or to the family income of the buyer.

Apparently a considerable proportion of the buyers had tried prepackaged meat since 80% of those who usually bought the unpackaged meat said they had at one time or another bought the prepackaged meat.

The preference for the prepackaged meat was not as strong as that for the unpackaged. Of those buyers who usually bought the prepackaged meat, 75% said they really preferred it, 16% preferred the unpackaged, and 9% had no preference. Of those who bought the unpackaged meat, 92% said they preferred this type, and only 1% preferred the packaged, while 7% had no preference for either form.

Of the buyers who bought both types of meat, 56% said they preferred the unpackaged, 21% preferred the prepackaged, and 23% had no preference.

When the buyers were asked what they considered the advantages and disadvantages of prepackaged meat, they named 992 disadvantages and only 720 advantages.

Almost half of the total number of advantages centered about the convenience of buying the prepackaged meat. Quick, easy selection and no waiting

were named most frequently. Wide selection and no pressure from salespersons were also listed as advantages of the prepackaged meat. The ability to see quality of the meat constituted 20% of the total criticisms given, almost 13% of the buyers having mentioned this factor. Lower prices and more sanitary conditions were mentioned by less than 6% of the buyers. A few buyers liked prepackaged meat because they could buy cheap cuts without embarrassment.

The criticism of prepackaged meat most frequently mentioned was that sometimes bones and fat were found concealed within the package. This constituted 19% of all the disadvantages listed and was mentioned by 16% of the buyers.

Closely related to this factor was the criticism made by 13% of the buyers that the packages prevented them from seeing the quality of the meat. This is in contrast to approximately the same number of persons who thought that prepackaging made it easy for them to see quality.

Nearly 15% of the buyers criticized the quality of prepackaged meat. They said it was not fresh or had an off odor or off flavor. This criticism constituted one sixth of all the disadvantages mentioned.

Nearly 16% of the buyers criticized the cuts of meats as they were prepackaged. They apparently felt that the cuts were not those customarily made or that they were not normal in some way.

About 10% of the buyers said that the absence of more than one size package constituted a real disadvantage in buying the prepackaged meat.

The largest proportion of the advantages named were given by those who usually bought the prepackaged meats and, conversely, the largest proportion of the disadvantages were given by those usually buying the unpackaged meat. However, only 46% of the advantages of the prepackaged meat were given by persons usually buying it, while 71% of the disadvantages were given by those who usually bought the unpackaged meat.

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