

from the office

LEAD IN

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At last a piece of research has been done to accurately measure the kind of beef that consumers prefer. Texas A&M University, in conjunction with the Texas Agricultural Market Research and Development Center, sent selected steaks to households on a regular basis. The steaks were cooked in the home and evaluated on the dinner table. A total of 8,000 individual evaluations were made by over 300 consumers in such diverse areas as San Francisco, Kansas City, Houston and Philadelphia.

The findings revealed what many of us beef lovers have known all along. That marbling greatly improves the taste and acceptability of beef steaks. In all areas of the country the test participants gave the USDA low Prime steaks the highest rating.

"... Eating quality increased as marbling increased," said Robert E. Brown, Texas A&M researcher when commenting on the results. "This raises a caution flag for the industry. It had better be careful as it goes toward lean beef or take the chance of chasing away the people who like better quality."

The researchers used a sophisticated rating system with 9 the top rating and

1 the lowest. Consumer products manufacturers will not introduce a new product unless tests show that a high percentage of consumers rate the product 7 or above. On the other hand, they cancel the introduction of a product that is rated 5 or lower.

In the Texas A&M beef test, 80.6 percent of the test families rated low Prime at 7 or above. Low Choice received a 7 rating or above by only 71.9 percent of the group. On the opposite side of the scale, 10.2 percent of the test group ranked low Prime steaks at 5 or below while 15 percent ranked high Good grade steaks at 5 or below.

The ranking of steaks was not affected by either cooking method or the degree of doneness. The people who liked steaks well done ranked Prime highest at about the same rate as those who cooked their steaks medium rare.

Based upon all the findings, the researchers recommended that beef grades should be grouped about as follows:

Top grade should include current USDA low Prime and high Choice grades.

Second grade should include middle and low Choice grades.

Third grade should include the present USDA Good grade.

Bottom grade should include the present USDA Standard grade.

Those of us in the Angus business should be particularly pleased with all this for two reasons. First, it shows that the Angus marbling trait is much more important than some researchers have previously thought. Second, the findings show that the standards for Certified Angus Beef fall within what the group recommended for the top grade of beef, namely the high Choice and low Prime level.

Of course, Certified Angus Beef (CAB) must meet a number of other rigid qualifications too in order to be stamped with the CAB logo, but the people who drew up the original specifications, namely Dr. Bob Van Stavern of Ohio State University, obviously knew what it took to produce a really great piece of beef.

It won't be easy to get some people to change their ideas. A few very vocal researchers have become extremely committed to the theory that consumers really prefer "lean" unmarbled beef. What's more, consumers have been sung the lean beef litany for so long that a considerable amount of education will be needed to change their perception of beef quality.

Many representatives of breeds of cattle that don't marble at an early age or that won't marble without first laying down a thick layer of fat cover (or both) will do their best to ignore the research.

But in the final analysis, the beef industry must produce the kind of product that best satisfies the customer. The research project done by Texas A&M University and the Texas Agricultural Market Research and Development Center received financial backing from the Agricultural Marketing Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Cattlemen's Assn., the Beef Industry Council of the National Livestock and Meat Board, and the Beef Councils of Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado and Kansas. With this many organizations involved it will be difficult to ignore.

The project should go a long way toward putting the beef industry on the right track—that of producing a high quality product that will appeal to a majority of the consuming public. **AJ**