

# Increasing the Odds for Beef



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From sensory science to instrument grading, tools add precision to measuring the relationships between marbling and eating quality.

by *Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

**Y**ou have to eat it. That's really the only way to know if a steak is going to be good or not.

So it is with all "experience goods." Tasting wine and using beauty products are other examples.

That's why it is so important to have a

system in place that helps predict product performance, says Daryl Tatum, Colorado State University meat scientist.

The wine industry has its ratings and flavor descriptions, and the beef community has its quality grades.

In a new research review, "Recent trends:

beef quality, value and price," Tatum combined the results of several studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the grading system's ability to predict sensory performance and value of beef.

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The results say consumers who want more than a “run of the mill” eating experience should reach for premium-Choice or Prime.

With Prime, there’s a 97% chance of having a good eating experience. There’s a 93% chance with premium-Choice, but only 82% with low-Choice. Select is a “roll of the dice,” Tatum explains, with a one-in-three chance of having a negative experience.

“After sorting for brands, what’s left in the Choice box isn’t too special,” Tatum says, noting that at least a third of the total Choice category is sold in branded beef and premium programs.

Moving up on the grading scale helps improve the odds dramatically. The odds of a good eating experience are 2.9 times greater when trading up from low-Choice to premium-Choice.

### Watching the signals

Economic signals reflect that reality.

“Sensory performance does align with the price difference in the trade,” he says.

From 2012 to 2014, the average carcass grid values showed a \$13.64-per-hundredweight (cwt.) premium for Prime, on down to a \$10.09-per-cwt. discount for Select. Charting those amounts along with the meat sensory measurements shows a linear relationship.

To grading-system critics, Tatum says, “When I look at these things, it seems to be working pretty well. I don’t think we’d have been able to trade beef at the prices we have been without some performance behind it,” he adds.

History demonstrated what happened when marbling wasn’t part of the equation as beef got leaner and the industry tried to compete with other proteins on price alone.

“Demand kept tanking,” Tatum says. “A lot of the quality signals and trends that we see today began back then.”

He referenced the opposite trends for commodity beef vs. the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, which got its start in 1978 and saw dramatic sales increases at a time when beef sales were declining overall.

Yet, much of the early science suggested marbling was not as important in younger animals. One study found it accounted for as little as 10% of the variation in eating quality.

Work done in 2013 shows marbling explains up to 61% of the variation in overall



► “After sorting for brands, what’s left in the Choice box isn’t too special,” says Colorado State University’s Daryl Tatum.

product performance consisting of juiciness, tenderness and flavor attributes.

“Advances in technology and improved methodology have allowed us to uncover some of those relationships, and we’re doing a better job of measuring the differences,” Tatum says. From sensory science to

instrument grading, there are more tools that add precision to measuring the relationships between marbling and eating quality.

Today’s science is convincing and fits well with the economics, Tatum says. The only way to be sure that an “experience good” is

going to give you a good experience is to make use of trusted marketing parameters so that it becomes more of a “search good,” something you seek out repeatedly because of more favorable experiences.

A certain brand, variety and vintage will increase your odds, but, “you never really know until you uncork the bottle,” he says.

Or take that first juicy bite.

To read the entire report, visit [www.CABpartners.com/educators](http://www.CABpartners.com/educators).



**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

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