

Meat Quality and Carcass Evaluation



Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a grading guide for certain food items, such as rabbit meat. These grades can help shoppers make wise food choices. The grading guide for rabbit meat is also useful to 4-H rabbit raisers in evaluating a rabbit's meat and carcass.

Consumers often look for meat labels that show a grade of quality. A grade helps the consumer feel more confident in purchasing ready-to-cook rabbit meat. Grading can also be used to set market prices for rabbit meat.



Fryers, Roasters and Stewers

Rabbits processed for meat are called fryers, roasters or stewers. The age and weight of the rabbit determines the title. Fryers are the youngest age division and are the lightest category. Stewers on the other hand, contain the oldest and heaviest rabbits. The USDA grading guidelines apply to both fryer and roaster classes of rabbits.

A fryer is less than 10 weeks old. It weighs 3.5 to 5.5 pounds live. A fryer's carcass should be more than half its live weight. This includes the liver, heart and kidneys. The flesh of a fryer is tender with a fine texture and a bright pearly white color. Fryers are the more common type of domestic meat rabbit.

Roasters are 10 weeks to 6 months old. They are commonly 5.5 to 9 pounds live. A roaster's carcass should weigh more than half of the rabbit's live weight. The flesh of a roaster is firmer than a fryer's. It is also slightly darker with a coarser texture.

Stewers are rabbits over 6 months old. They must have attained a weight of 8 pounds or more live. Their carcass is generally firmer, contains more fat and is course.

Fryers, roasters and stewers can be sold alive. They may also go to market as whole carcasses. Sometimes they go to market in six or seven pieces as a cut-up carcass. Certain organs are sold with the carcass most of the time. These are the heart, liver and kidneys, which can be eaten. The total edible parts of a rabbit carcass are about 85 percent of the dressed weight.

Quality Standards and Grades

Rabbit carcasses are graded as A, B or C. Carcasses or cut-up parts of a carcass that aren't fit to be food shouldn't be graded. The following sections explain what determines A, B and C quality carcasses.

An "A" Quality Carcass:

- ▶ Has no sign of blood clots due to incomplete bleeding. (Incomplete bleeding occurs when the blood doesn't completely drain out of the slaughtered carcass.)
- ▶ Has no sign of reddened flesh caused by fluid buildup in the connective tissues (the tissues that connect muscles).
- ▶ Is free of hair, dirt, broken bones, bruises, defects and deformities. The ends of the leg bones may be broken due to removing the feet.
- ▶ Is short, thick, well-rounded and full fleshed.
- ▶ Has a broad back and hips, broad and deep fleshed shoulders, and firm muscle texture.
- ▶ Has a fair amount of interior fat in the crotch over the inner walls of the body cavity. There should also be a moderate amount of fat around the kidneys.

A "B" Quality Carcass:

- ▶ Has no sign of incomplete bleeding, except for an occasional and slight clot in a vein.
- ▶ Has no sign of reddened flesh caused by a fluid buildup in the connective tissue.
- ▶ Is free of hair, dirt, broken bones, bruises, defects and deformities. The ends of the leg bones may be broken due to removing the feet.
- ▶ Is short, thick, fairly well-rounded and fairly well-fleshed.
- ▶ Has a fairly broad back and hips, fairly broad and deep fleshed shoulders, and fairly firm muscle texture.
- ▶ Has at least a small amount of interior fat in the crotch and over the inner walls of the carcass. There should also be a small amount of interior fat around the kidneys.

A "C" Quality Carcass:

- ▶ May show slightly reddened flesh caused by blood clotting in the connective tissues.
- ▶ Is free of hair, dirt, bone particles and bones that were crushed by removing the head or feet, except at the ends of the feet.
- ▶ May have moderate bruises, defects and deformities. There may be broken ends of leg bones caused by the removal of the feet, but there should be no more than one broken bone in addition to this.
- ▶ May have a small part of the carcass removed because of serious bruises.
- ▶ May have flesh that is discolored from bruising but must be free of clots (clumps of dark or red cells).
- ▶ May be long, rangy (skinny) and fairly well-fleshed.
- ▶ May have a thin, narrow back and hips. Muscle texture may be soft and flabby.
- ▶ May have little outer fat.

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