



GROUND MEATS

From fast food and roadside restaurants or trendy city cafes, to family kitchens across the country, ground beef is a universal staple on American tables. Hamburgers are served everywhere. Yet there is no place in the meatcase with greater chance for consumer confusion, or opportunity for retailer error, than in the ground meat section. It follows that standardization of the name on the label—including a clear compositional definition—would eliminate both misunderstanding and error.

While pork, lamb and veal are also sold as ground products (and are included in this chapter), the authors have devoted this discussion primarily to ground beef, due to its sales volume. The principles reviewed in this chapter apply equally to other ground meats and retailers should be cognizant of local, state or federal regulatory action that might have an impact upon labeling for all ground meats.



Many Names for Ground Beef

Fresh ground beef products have traditionally been sold with primal names, such as “Ground Round,” “Ground Chuck,” “Ground Sirloin,” “Ground Beef,” and “Hamburger” virtually everywhere in the U.S. In some eastern regions ground beef is called, locally, “Chopped Meat,” or colloquially, “Chop Meat.” The only “common point” across the country has been the uniform regulatory requirement that ground beef cannot exceed 30% fat content.

The obvious reason for labeling ground beef with primal cut names has been that the product comes from those specific sections of the carcass. Over the years, consumers have assumed that the grinds bearing those labels were more or less superior. This might be true, but only in terms of general lean-to-fat ratio. For example, Ground Round is very lean; Ground Chuck is less lean. The flavor and nutritive values have been thought to be different, with the Ground Round being “better.” In fact, Round is leaner, and should carry a higher price. But the difference (and its value) lies in the lean-to-fat ratio, not in the origin of the cut.

It is unfortunate that the conventional preparation practice of selling “Ground Round” with non-round trimmings mixed sometimes has been perceived by consumer activists as deceptive. It should be noted that there are no compositional descriptions on grinds with primal names, such as Ground Round, Chuck, etc. Consequently, while the relative leanness of Ground Chuck, Ground Round and Ground Sirloin may be the same across the industry, the *compositional descriptions* of each may vary among chains, or even between competing stores within a marketing area. Therefore, it is difficult for a consumer to make an informed purchasing decision based upon labeling that does not identify the lean-to-fat composition.

Still, there is ample evidence that true value to the consumer should be based on the lean-to-fat ratio, and that there are no discernible flavor differences between meat from one part of the carcass

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compared to another, provided they have the same balance of lean and fat.

As retailers are aware, the lean-to-fat ratio of ground meat is important to consumers in relation to its use in recipes, and including their concern over nutritive value. If product is to be used for burgers, breakfast patties, spaghetti sauce, meat loaf or other dishes, dependence upon the lean or fat content is apt to be critical to the recipe's outcome.

Ground beef is "Ground Beef"

The *ICMISC* feels that suspicion and criticism in this vital area of meat merchandising will be eliminated through the use of the singular, all-inclusive "Ground Beef" name, *with its composition qualified on the label*.

Therefore, after considering available facts and opinions, as well as common practices, the *ICMISC* concluded in 1973 that all beef that is ground should be labeled as "Ground Beef," with an accompanying compositional description (lean-to-fat ratio) stated.

Equipment for Scientific Analysis

There were several types of equipment designed to determine the amount of fat in ground meat products, and, no doubt, more instruments will be brought on stream as time passes. The "official" testing method, used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (as well as most state and local regulators), is a chemical process, performed in a laboratory. Others include infrared, electronic or sonic devices. These all measure accurately within tenths of a percent.

Measuring units available for store level use are employed by various retailers to conduct batch analyses in individual stores. Though relatively inexpensive, they add a cost, nonetheless, to operations in the meat department. However, managers who are able to closely control the fat/lean content of ground meats, particularly ground beef, will realize a double benefit. They will maximize profitability from their ground meats program, and will avoid being confronted by a regulatory agency for mislabeling.

Ground Beef Specifications

Ed. Note: At press time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture was yet to issue an anticipated regulation for the labeling of ground meats. The editors have chosen to provide the following excerpt from the pending proposed regulation. However, retailers should be cognizant of the regulatory changes and label ground meats accordingly.

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USDA/Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) is proposing to amend its regulations to require nutrition labels on all ground or chopped meat and poultry products, with or without added seasonings, unless an exemption applies. Under existing regulations, multi-ingredient ground or chopped products (e.g., ground pork with seasonings), and heat processed [multi-ingredient] ground or chopped products (e.g., fully cooked or partially cooked patties) are required to be nutritionally labeled, unless they qualify for an exemption, but single-ingredient, raw ground or chopped products are not required to be so labeled. Without nutrition information for single-ingredient, raw ground or chopped products, the Agency has tentatively concluded that these products would be misbranded under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act. The Agency has also tentatively determined that single-ingredient, raw ground or chopped meat and poultry products are different from other single-ingredient, raw meat and poultry products in several important respects. Thus, FSIS is proposing to make nutrition labeling requirements for all ground or chopped meat and poultry products consistent with those currently required for products in the mandatory nutrition labeling program (multi-ingredient and heat processed products).

FSIS is proposing to require nutrition labels on packages of single-ingredient, raw ground or chopped products, rather than at their point-of-purchase, largely because these products are similar to products in the mandatory nutrition labeling program (which requires nutrition information to be on the label of individual packages), in that certain parameters, such as their fat content, can be controlled precisely to obtain the desired product.

FSIS is withdrawing its proposed rule of May 24, 1994 (59 FR 26916), which sought to amend the regulations by permitting percentage labeling for lean and fat on ground beef and hamburger, when the product did not meet the regulatory criteria established for "low fat," if the product had nutrition information on its labeling or in point-of-purchase materials that were in close proximity to the product. FSIS is withdrawing this proposal and proposing revised percentage labeling requirements in this rule. In this proposal, FSIS is expanding the categories of ground or chopped products that can have lean percentage labeling.

FSIS is proposing to permit a statement of lean percentage on the label or in labeling of ground or chopped meat and poultry products that do not meet the regulatory criteria for "low fat." The Agency is proposing to do so because many consumers have become accustomed to this labeling on ground beef products, and because FSIS believes this labeling provides a quick, simple, accurate means of comparing all ground or chopped meat and poultry products. The proposed regulatory language requires that a statement of fat percentage be contiguous to, in lettering of the same color, size and type as, and on the same color background as, the statement of lean percentage. The Agency is proposing these requirements concerning size, type, and color to ensure that the statement of the fat percentage is as clear and readily observable as the statement of the lean percentage.

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Receiving Pre-Ground Supplies

Most meat packers, vendors, wholesalers and cooperative central meat warehouses provide vacuum packs of both coarse grind and fine grind beef as either a supplement to, or for the complete ground beef supply for retail customers. Assuming that the product has been prepared and labeled under government inspection, the content of the package must conform to the label description (e.g. Ground Chuck, 17% fat, etc.). To assure its content, the product has likely been thoroughly tested by the vendor for its lean-to-fat ratio with a high degree of accuracy. At the store, it may be further ground/processed, and if mixed with “house” trimmings, this may cause the composition to change.

Ground Pork, Veal and Lamb

Trimmings of the other meats also are often ground and merchandised as fresh (unseasoned) products. They may be packaged separately, or sometimes these ground meats are merchandised in combination packages, perhaps labeled as “For Meat Loaf.” Beef, too, is sometimes contained in such combination packages.

The regulatory standards (to date) do not cover the lean-to-fat ratio of these co-mingled products, but care should be taken, nonetheless, to produce consistent quality and to carefully label each package as to the species origin of its content.

A seasoned preparation of “Pork Sausage” may be merchandised fresh for the meat case, sometimes labeled or advertised as a breakfast meat, or perhaps as a stuffing ingredient. Although regulations stipulate no greater than a 50% fat content, the *ICMISC* recommends that such products (including the “combination packs”) do not exceed the 30% fat content, which is the same as the regulatory fat maximum for ground beef.

It remains that ground meats and ground beef, in particular, are a favored “cut” appearing in many recipe forms on the American table. Great care should be taken by retailers to present it as “freshly ground” and accurately labeled.

Note: the percentage of lean for all the photographic exhibits was determined by chemical analysis in the Meat Science Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.

Ground veal is not pictured because the normal light color of the product did not allow a photographically clear differentiation of the percentage of lean/fat.

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