

Bryan Schaaf:

Back here on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand. Winter is officially upon us here, and what I like to do in the wintertime is I like to go down rabbit holes. Some years it's music, some years it's food, some years it's more science-based. This is in there a little bit, and I'm really excited to talk about this. So before we begin, I'm Bryan Schaaf. With me here, as always, Chef Tony Biggs, meat scientist, Diana Clark. Guys, how are you doing?

Tony Biggs:

Hey, how are you?

Diana Clark:

Stupendous. I try to think of a new word to say every time, and, yeah, I always say, no, I'm good. I got to get up [crosstalk 00:00:46].

Bryan Schaaf:

Stupendous.

Diana Clark:

Yeah, stupendous.

Tony Biggs:

I like that, stupendous. I like that.

Bryan Schaaf:

If you ever look up the YouTube video of... It's Will Ferrell doing, I think it's the host of Behind The Actor's Guild. He says, "Scrumtrulescent." Which is what I like to keep in my wheelhouse. Pull that on special occasions.

Diana Clark:

I love Will Ferrell.

Bryan Schaaf:

That said, I want everybody to close your eyes and I'm going to take you back in time. The year is 1902. Chef Tony-

Tony Biggs:

Should we do the...

Bryan Schaaf:

Right. 1902, Chef Tony. You had not gone to culinary school yet at that point, right?

Tony Biggs:

No. [crosstalk 00:01:36].

Bryan Schaaf:

1902. And I know this rings so near and dear to Diana Clark's heart. There was a gentleman named Herbert Mumford from the university of Illinois. What is it? [crosstalk 00:01:48]. INI, there you go.

Diana Clark:

Yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

So Herbert Mumford, who was not related to the guy who had Mumford & Sons, we'll just go ahead and put that out there. He wrote a paper that was called Market Classes and Grades of Cattle With Suggestions for Interpreting Market Quotations. Maybe we need to work on the title a little bit, but from that paper was the birth of the thought of grading meat. That all meat from all animals is not necessarily scientifically the same.

Bryan Schaaf:

Years and years later, we are where we are today, where I think there's a general understanding of meat grading. But we're going to go ahead, I'm just going to give you a rough history of meat grading, because Tony has culinary prowess, Diana is very, very, very, smart, and I have the ability to read things on the internet.

Bryan Schaaf:

I'll go and give some dates real quick. But 1902, this paper was produced. It got the wheel spinning in terms of, maybe this is a thing. In 1916, the government got involved and had the first written standards for what this grading needs to look like. In 1925, the government went all over the country, they had a series of public hearings to get feedback from consumers, from packers, from farmers, on what did we think about this? And then from 1926 to 1927, they implemented a trial period of beef grading at packing plants that was free. I say, free. Paid for with tax dollars. It was voluntary, but nobody had to pay for it, of course. And then after that, anybody can still be graded, but now that cost is incurred by the packers.

Bryan Schaaf:

And that leads us to where we are today, where we have a whole slew of different grades of beef. Obviously we're biased to Certified Angus Beef, which is at the very top of that grading scale. But that said, taking a step back and understanding the whole process is quite the rabbit hole to fall down.

Bryan Schaaf:

Diana, let's first talk about beef grading versus inspection. There's obviously a huge difference here.

Diana Clark:

Oh yeah. So inspection, like Bryan had alluded to at the beginning just with grading, how grading originally was "free" for that one trial period, that's what inspection is technically free, We pay for as taxpayers, to make sure that our meat is safe. All meat is USDA inspected. Whether it's sold in state or out of state or anything like that, it has to be inspected in order to be sold. That's the only time when it's not inspected is if you bring, let's say you were hunting, you happen to get a deer, you're bringing it to

be processed, and you're taking that back home. That's that custom process. It doesn't technically need to be inspected there, but every other time it is.

Diana Clark:

Grading, on the other hand, grading is looking at the quality and the value of the meat itself. So that is paid for by the packer itself to make sure... If he's going to make a little bit more money on it by offering USDA prime choice, select, what have you, then he has to pay for a USDA grader to come in and officially look at his meat and tell you what quality level it is.

Diana Clark:

Two completely separate entities. They do not function together at all. But they often get confused, grading versus inspection. Inspection, safe, wholesale meat. Grading, tasty, delicious meat.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. So grading, it's done by, and this is a rare time when I'll say good things about government, to this day, grading is still done by USDA, who are unbiased third parties. They dictate what goes into prime, choice, select you name it boxes, even Certified Angus Beef. So we don't have the power to be like, "Hey, let's let a few more tenderloins in this week because supply is down." Well, no, it doesn't work that way.

Bryan Schaaf:

The government, it doesn't matter to them. It is what it is, they're going to stamp it as such, and move on from there. But when we talk about grading, we talk about, I guess, in vague terms, these standards. What does this look like? But what does this look like? At the end of the day, marbling score is a huge factor in grading, but it's not the only thing, right?

Diana Clark:

In all technicality, when you look at USDA grading alone, so you get this overall quality grade, which is USDA prime, USDA choice, USDA select. There's actually more quality grades that fall below there. However, they look at two things, they'll look at the amount of marbling that that animal has and the overall age or maturity of the animal.

Diana Clark:

Now, it wasn't until November, 2017, that they switched to looking actually at the animal's teeth to determine the maturity, and they actually only do that for animals 30 months of age or less to look at their dentition. If they're over 30 months of age, then they look at their physiological maturity, which is actually looking at their vertebrae, and you see these white cartilaginous buttons on there. So the more bright white these buttons are, the younger the animal is, and you can fall into younger maturity grades.

Diana Clark:

Essentially those are the two categories that they'll look at for USDA grading. So marbling and maturity, and that is it.

Bryan Schaaf:

Interesting. So over the years, this process, I mean, obviously they've changed things a little bit in terms of, I guess, in terms of obviously devices they use, they use a lot of camera grading now, but let's talk about that. What specifically are they grading? You already touched on it a little bit. Of course, mainstream, most everybody you know, especially in the food industry, knows prime, choice, and select. But there are five more actual grades of meat.

Bryan Schaaf:

Should we do this quiz style? Tony Biggs, you feeling this? You think you can name the other five grades?

Tony Biggs:

Okay.

Bryan Schaaf:

All right, let's go. There's five more.

Tony Biggs:

There's standard.

Bryan Schaaf:

Standard.

Tony Biggs:

There's utility.

Bryan Schaaf:

Utility.

Tony Biggs:

There's cutter.

Bryan Schaaf:

Cutter.

Tony Biggs:

Canner.

Bryan Schaaf:

Canner.

Tony Biggs:

Commercial.

Bryan Schaaf:

Commercial.

Diana Clark:

Yes.

Bryan Schaaf:

You know what you win for that, Tony? You win a cutter strip line.

Tony Biggs:

Oh my gosh, thank you. Oh my God. I think I'm going to braise it tonight.

Bryan Schaaf:

You know what, I'm fascinated by these five tiers, because I feel like you could be in this industry for a while and not realize there's anything below select. Diana, talk. What is this? It feels like mythical meat, because you never go into a restaurant and be like, "We offer USDA utility ribeyes."

Diana Clark:

No. This is the cool part. So there's this whole grid that they have set up, so on one side you have the marbling score, which goes from, let's see if I can do this correctly, abundant, moderately abundant, slightly abundant, that falls into prime, then you go to moderate, modest, small that falls into choice, and then after that you'll go into slight, which is you have high and low slight, which would be your high and low select, and then you go to traces and practically devoid. That is probably my favorite name for marbling, is practically devoid.

Diana Clark:

But so you have those on the marbling score. Then on the top half, you have your maturity. So the age of the animal, A, B, C, D, and E. So your A and B, that's encompassing all of your cattle that more fall into, can fall into, USDA prime, USDA choice, and USDA select. So those are cattle under 42 months of age.

Diana Clark:

Once you get over 42 months of age, you fall into those older categories, your C, D, and E, and essentially that meat is so... It can have a lot of marbling, however, it's so old, physiologically old, that the older that animal gets, the tougher those pieces of meat are going to be, so the lower the quality the meat will be.

Diana Clark:

So what are some options to do with those cuts of meat that have really a lot of connective tissue collagen built up? Well, there's a couple things. One, you can braise such cuts, so those are going to fall into different categories like you think of Campbell's soup, how they have little chunks of beef in there. Probably going to find some really old cows in that mixture. Another one, dog food. Dogs can chew pretty much anything. Look at my dog. She's chewed a leather couch. She's chewed stairs before. They literally can eat things, whatever it is. So that can fall into another category.

Diana Clark:

Then we also have this huge, ginormous category of ground beef. What's the best way to break down meat and make it more tender? Throw it through a grinder. So you have all of those older cattle are going to fall into that category. A lot of it's going to go into grinds, and I will have to say, this is a huge flagship for Certified Angus Beef of what makes it so different, because Certified Angus Beef does not allow any of those cattle to come into our program. There is no USDA choice ground beef. There is no USDA prime ground beef. We have Certified Angus Beef prime. We have Certified Angus Beef ground beef, which has just those younger, maturity cattle in our program. All the other ground beef is primarily going to be supplied by those older cows, because we got to do something with it to make it tender. The grinder is the best option for that.

Diana Clark:

So that's something to always really think about in the whole meat category. The cool part is, with the USDA grading system, it really does add value to those different parts of beef, but everything gets used and we have homes for everything. So I understand that it's, okay, these cattle are older, what are we going to do it? We're going to waste it? No, we definitely use every single piece and part of it somewhere, some form, somehow. And they're not taking the strip loins, the ribeyes, and the tenderloins and throwing those to the grinders. Those have homes as well. I know many times I have purchased, when I was in college, 5.99 tenderloins at GFS because they were really cheap and I thought it was going to be good. Definitely not as good as your traditional tenderloin, but hey, it's a cheap tenderloin.

Diana Clark:

For someone that needs to have that value item, that option's out there within the beef industry. So just to see how they utilize all those pieces and parts and find homes for them, is pretty phenomenal. But it is, I think, everyone really forgets about all that other meat and thinks that all the beef just falls into this one small category. It's like, no, that's a really tiny chunk of the whole realm of the beef industry.

Bryan Schaaf:

That's interesting. Chef Tony, you have been cooking, we joke about 1902, but I mean, you've been cooking for a lot of years here. Talk to us about the learning curve, especially in the 70s and 80s. Obviously, I mean, things have changed even since then in terms of grading scales and things like that. There used to be a category called good, which makes me laugh because it's like, it's good. How's this beef? It's good.

Tony Biggs:

It's good.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's all right.

Tony Biggs:

It's good.

Bryan Schaaf:

But I mean, talk. I mean, if anything, the terms are a little confusing, I feel like can be a little misleading. I mean, obviously if you call something canner, maybe that one is not misleading, but select, choice, prime, that's a little confusing.

Tony Biggs:

I think the first time I heard those words were at the Culinary Institute of America, and that was actually the first time I saw a whole carcass, or a side of beef, and I think it was more drilled into a chef's head or the future culinarian, more importantly prime, choice, and select. Yeah, we talked about standard commercial grades and canner and the rest of the five, but those were the ones that were like, okay, hey, this is prime beef. Why is it prime? It has more marbling, it's abundant. It has amount of fat. This is good for roast, steaks. Excellent for dry heat cooking, such as broiling, roasting, and grilling. This is the type of beef you want to sell into your restaurants.

Tony Biggs:

But you're going to pay a little bit more for the prime. So we were also food costs conscientious as well, because, let's face it, you have to make a profit where you can. So in some cases in my career I've had functions or events where I just can't afford prime. So what would I go to? I would go maybe to a choice. A choice is just as good. It's high quality beef. It's really high quality. But let's face it, it has less marbling than a prime piece, and you're going to pay a cheaper price for that.

Tony Biggs:

So if you, back in the 70s, I hate to say this, but if you wanted a \$10 steak dinner, yes, I would probably go with my choice cut. And then if I wanted to really run really great specials, I would probably go with a select. It's much leaner. And I've seen select on menus, which people now are more fat conscientious on their diets, so they're going with a little bit more leaner meats. I would say they're probably using a select.

Tony Biggs:

For me, I like prime or choice, but if you want something a little bit leaner with less fat, then of course they would serve select. In the industry, the select would probably be more affordable. Depends on what kind of restaurant or outlet you have. But yeah, I would say basically the prime, choice, and select were really the forefathers of our thinking and what we're preparing.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. You know, it's funny, it wasn't all that long ago that really the standard for beef in grocery stores and restaurants, that select was the standard, and then if you wanted a really rocking eating experience, there was USDA choice, and then these mythical unicorns of prime. You didn't see prime very often. That was probably 20-ish years ago, as reason as that. But you look at what's happening today and it's almost like the expectation is choice, and then it's like, we could kick it up to prime. And there's more of that, there's less select beef out there.

Bryan Schaaf:

Truly, there's no other reason for that other than farmers everywhere are feeding cattle with a better understanding of, I want them to fall into these higher echelons of the grading scale.

Bryan Schaaf:

But in terms of what's going through the packing plant... And I know we've all been through them. I'm always amazed at how much select beef is still going through packing plants, because you can stand behind the USDA graders and see these things as they're coming across. But Diana, if you could talk to us about what is physically happening in that packing plant during the grading process.

Bryan Schaaf:

I mean, not everybody gets to go through a large scale beef packing plant. It's a pretty interesting process. It's an impressive display of efficiency, but also inaccuracy too.

Diana Clark:

It's kind of incredible. One of the first times that I've had the ability to really appreciate our USDA graders is I was doing a meat judging contest. So we actually will bring in students from all over the nation, and I was one of the judges, one of the officials. So we set up the contests and we were at a beef packing plant facility on a normal operating day, and I was in charge of pulling carcasses off the line that I thought would be good for quality grading and a beef class. So my goal is to try to get a wide variety of things, that's my goal as I stand there.

Diana Clark:

All I had to do was put a tag in it, that's all I had to do, was put a tag in it. Oh my goodness, that was the fastest 20 minutes that had ever flown by and I was sweating profusely after it, because I didn't know if I got the right ones or where I was at or what I was doing. These things were just flying by me. And I was at a plant that isn't even as high speed as some other plants.

Diana Clark:

I really give that USDA grader, a lot of credit. As these sides of these are coming down the line, they have five to eight seconds to look at it and they have to tell us that marbling, maturity, for USDA choice, select, whatever. But then you think about programs, Certified Angus Beef, they have to look at all of our other specifications as well to see if it qualifies or not. So they're looking at your hump height, they're looking at the actual amount of fat, the size of the ribeye, the type of marbling. And they're doing this all very quickly, which is phenomenal.

Diana Clark:

Now you've alluded to the camera grading that's been introduced as well, and they can actually utilize that within this process. So typically you have someone from the plant that is standing a little bit up chain from that USDA grader. So you'll have someone first rib the carcass, it pops open, it's going to take some time to go through, about 15 minutes to get to that person who's going to take a picture that way it can bloom and you can see all the beautiful colors, you can see that marbling. They'll snap a photo of it. That picture actually is able to tell us the percentage of marbling in there and give us a overall quality grading score the size of the ribeye, the thickness of the fat.

Diana Clark:

That USDA grader is standing close enough to that camera where they can see what that official score was, and they can utilize that to their advantage. And they can say, "I'm going to agree with the camera



on that one. I think it falls somewhere in between here." Or they can say, "No, no, no, that camera did not take the right picture. They picked up too much fat here. I'm going to call it this instead."

Diana Clark:

So they really will be able to evaluate the animal in time, and it's kind of amazing. I mean, when you do stuff over and over again every single day, you get pretty dang good at what you do. So for a USDA grader to look at ribeye and say, "Yeah, that's about 12 square inches," they're pretty spot on. It's kind of amazing, actually, how close they are when they get to that.

Diana Clark:

But essentially after that, that animal will then be railed off and it can go into separate areas based on what that USDA grader called it, so that way we can have separate rails to be from there. And it is a fairly quick process before that carcass is out the door after that.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. Well said. One of the things that jumped out at me, it kind of made me laugh, because beef packers are a real necessity to obviously feeding the world. But a lot of times they tend to move very slowly. Not in terms of how they produce things, but in terms of changing things. Because if you've ever been through a beef packing plant, I mean, the engineering, the different shoots, the way things [inaudible 00:22:00] that if they are going to change their procedure, it is a major ordeal. It's why things like getting them to fabricate the flat iron steak, it was such an accomplishment, because, I mean, they had to really change how they do things. And there's a lot of moving parts and a lot of people involved in this.

Bryan Schaaf:

But it made me laugh. In 1927, during the public comments portion, the major beef packers were opposed to grading in general and they actually said it was an unworkable program. Which if you spend some time, you explore the history of Certified Angus Beef, that was also termed an unworkable program. History repeats itself. 40, 42, 43 years ago, we're still here in and thriving as well.

Bryan Schaaf:

But where I was going with that was, the beef packers, one of the things that was touted as doing was grading, was it shifted the tide. There were major packers in the country, and they thought by allowing the small guys to have USDA graders as well, it was this great leveling of the playing field and that it decentralized.

Bryan Schaaf:

Now, of course, through economics and things like that, where it's gone the way of there are major packers, but there are also small guys as well. There's a lot of talk about the big four packers. Who, again, never to throw them under the bus, they are necessary to feeding the world, but there's a lot of small regional guys as well.

Bryan Schaaf:

One of the ones that's near and dear to our hearts is Bob Boliantz, E R Boliantz Packing Ashland, Ohio. The motherland. They have a USDA grader. In these big plants, USDA graders are in their every second that beef is being produced. The small guys, not necessarily that way. Can you talk about that?

Diana Clark:

Lane is the USDA grader for Boliantz. He actually comes once a week and goes in and grades our cattle. He does everything with pen and paper, writes it all down. If we need that information, he will have it. And he has a regional area that he represents, and he doesn't just do beef. So he is a USDA grader. When I worked at the veal packing plant, he actually came in there, and that is beef, technically, but he graded the veal, completely different grading system than our beef fed cattle. Then you could also stop in and do lamb. So it depends on what is needed within that area for that grader to move around.

Diana Clark:

But like you said, it's kind of neat because I think these small places are... How before that by having the USDA grades that made them very popular and started to take away from these national houses, but then these national houses became big again, and primarily because running a packing plant is expensive and it's not easy. It is actually very, very hard work. So finding people to do it is hard to do. Finding the resources to run it are hard to do. So unless like Boliantz, Boliantz has had history of this making, of being able to build and continue, and I mean, Bob's adjusted his program tremendously since he's been around, but this has been a family passed down generation operation there.

Diana Clark:

Trying to start that up is really challenging, but like you said, we have big guys and little guys for a reason. We can operate and support different parts of the country, but more importantly, the United States supports the world in terms of beef consumption, which is just a powerful protein that really helps people grow and gives them their nutrition. I mean, as we head in the new year, people want to watch what they're eating. I mean, beef is where it's at in all shapes and forms. They really should focus in on that protein category.

Diana Clark:

But that's the beauty behind our industry. I feel like we have those big and little guys that are in there, and the USDA graders are able to support all of them, depending on what they need.

Diana Clark:

You think of your large scale USDA graders, they'll actually rotate out quite a bit, so they're not sit in the plants all the time, to give them some of that perspective. And, on top of that, all of graders are actually audited to make sure that they're providing correct and proper information. So you don't have this grader that's just giving all prime because he's getting paid under the table by so-and-so. No, they're checked to make sure that they are operating appropriately and correctly. So it's kind of cool to see the system working right.

Bryan Schaaf:

It's kind of cool the way that it's set up, in that you've got your big packers, you've got your small packers, and you've also got your regional guys. I always think of guys like Greater Omaha Packing or [Demcoda 00:26:46], those sort of midscale guys who are producing high quality. But that grading

standard doesn't change from plant to plant, so whether it comes from E R Boliantz, where that animal was fabricated by four butchers with knives, or whether it was done on a rail at Tyson Sioux Falls, who's pushing thousands of carcasses a day, the grading is the same.

Bryan Schaaf:

Now what I have noticed is different plants will produce different amounts of prime, different amounts of choice, different amounts of select, but that has more to do with the region they are in the country and the cattle coming in.

Diana Clark:

Yes, for sure. You're going to have people that do procurement, is what it's called, of going out and selecting those cattle. And they'll select them not only on... They'll try to say, oh yeah, we want to make sure that we get USDA prime. We get USDA choice. But some plants actually might operate and say, we have customers that want to purchase this lower quality meat, so we know we need to buy these cattle here to come in and grade. And so they have... It's actually incredible to think about how futuristic these people need to be when it comes to purchasing the cattle to then be processed and sold. It's unbelievable and I can't even fathom having that job. I probably would be so nervous doing anything every single day. But that's just what they do. They think about the needs of the people down the line and they try to buy based off of past trends and current trends and all that. So it's kind of incredible to see.

Bryan Schaaf:

Excellent. All right, before we let you guys go, because I actually think you guys have a meeting going on now that I'm keeping you away from. Oh, well.

Diana Clark:

That's all right.

Bryan Schaaf:

Certified Angus Beef, obviously we're never going to hide it. We're biased. We work for Certified Angus Beef, and it exists. When people say, "What is Certified Angus Beef?" and some people say, "Well, it's a brand," which, I guess, technically it is a brand, but truly it's a quality grade just like prime, choice, select. I mean, we live on that grading scale. Talk about that though, because just like commercial cattle that are assessed on marbling score and age, Certified Angus Beef is as well, right?

Diana Clark:

Yeah, it's looked at the exact same way. So you're going to get plugged in. I mean that USDA grader, he's not going to look at it any differently, he's just going to look at a few more parameters to make sure that it falls into the brand. And if it makes it, it makes it, and if it doesn't, it doesn't. Which it's good and bad at the same time, because sometimes we might have a lower supply because of it. However, that's also why we work with a bunch of different packing partners to keep our supply going. So by having more packing partners across the country, we're able to maintain that steady supply of Certified Angus Beef and maintain some price competitiveness as well, because not all of our eggs are in one basket at one packer, so they can adjust things and have some competition across the board. So that is the beauty of Certified Angus Beef for sure.

Bryan Schaaf:

I like it. It's a bit of a safeguard just in case... And I'm certainly not saying... I believe the leadership at Certified Angus Beef is as good and honest and straightforward as they come, but if, far off in a distant future, it fell into nefarious hands, you still can't bribe a USDA grader.

Diana Clark:

Exactly.

Bryan Schaaf:

They got their gig and they're good, which makes you feel good, obviously. That said, I'm going to turn you guys loose here because you guys have a meeting to get to, and I think I've got a meeting too, but I don't [inaudible 00:30:36]. That surprises nobody. That said, we appreciate you tuning into the Meat Speak podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand.

Bryan Schaaf:

You can find us across all of your major podcasting platforms, Google Play, Apple, Spotify. If you could go over to the Apple icon on your phone, that's the little purple icon, leave us a star rating. Leave us a review. We'll probably talk about it on this podcast, especially if it's very entertaining. There's a fresh one on there from our pals at Fox Brothers down in Atlanta, who make delicious barbecue as well, by the way. That is not just barbecue, that is prime brisket is what they're using. That's at the top of that. They're not using canner or cutter, Tony Biggs.

Tony Biggs:

No. Or commercial. No. No.

Bryan Schaaf:

[crosstalk 00:31:27]. That said, we appreciate you tuning into the podcast. Please know you can find us across all of those podcasting platforms, or by visiting [certifiedangusbeef.com/podcast](https://certifiedangusbeef.com/podcast).

Bryan Schaaf:

I'm going to spend my weekend, I'm actually going to cook up, I think, a canner strip steak and spend my entire weekend chewing it. [crosstalk 00:31:47]. It seems like a good way to exercise the old mouth muscles.

Bryan Schaaf:

Until next time, for Chef Tony Biggs, meat scientist, Diana Clark, thank y'all for tuning in. And thanks for listening to the Meat Speak podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand.