



MEAT BUYING CHEAT SHEET

FEARLESS  FRESH

from STEPHANIE STIAVETTI

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BEFORE YOU CAN LEARN HOW TO COOK MEAT, you have to know how to buy it, right? Right!

Buying high-quality meat is super important, because there are so many grocery stores out there that sell sub-par meat that's getting old, been mishandled, and/or has been filled with additives. These problems definitely affect the flavor and enjoyability of your cooking projects. If you're cooking lousy meat, how can you expect it to taste delicious after it's been cooked? Exactly.

So let's get into the nitty-gritty on what to look for when you buy fresh meat.

Know where your meat comes from. Local meat can be safer than feedlot meat.



WHERE TO BUY:

FIRST THINGS FIRST: If you can, I highly recommend you buy your meat from a local independent butcher. Getting to know the person you buy your meat from is not only great for your culinary education, it's incredibly satisfying to know and trust the person who provides your food. Plus, the more you know this person, the more they'll share their vast meat knowledge with you. My local butcher will actually squirrel away special cuts for me, just because he knows I like them. Awesome!

Another option is the butcher counter at a local grocery store. While grocery stores are big operations, some are implementing the old-timey butcher counter to try and connect with their customers. The good thing about buying from these guys or girls is that they can get you a better deal on meat than a smaller shop, which still offering a personal touch and additional information about the meat you're buying.

A NOTE ON BUTCHERS: TALK TO THEM

I see so many people scurry into the butcher shop and then all but run out of the place in terror once they have their meat in hand. Butchers are generally really approachable, and they love to talk about a subject they know a lot about: meat. So if you have questions about how to prepare a cut, how long to cook something, or are just curious about an unfamiliar cut of meat, all you have to do is ask! And if there's not a long line behind you, try striking up a genuine conversation. You never know when you might find an extra chicken leg or two in your bag. (Just sayin')

CSAs—YOUR BEST SOURCE FOR LOCAL MEAT



Also at the top of the list are meat CSAs, programs that sell farm-fresh meat to the public directly from local farmers. These options tend to be on the pricey side, but they're often your best choice when it comes to buying meat

that is fresh, humanely raised, and not pumped full of hormones and antibiotics. If you can afford it, this is definitely the best option. Many meat CSAs have yearly open farm parties so members of the CSA can have a picnic and see how the animals are raised. Seriously fun.

If your only option is buying packaged meat at the grocery store, then go for it. I won't judge! Some supermarkets sell surprisingly good meat, though you'll want to be aware of a few caveats, which you'll find in the next section.

HOW TO BUY MEAT FROM A GROCERY STORE:

If you're buying meat from an actual person, the first thing you want to do is ask how fresh the meat is. If you're buying packaged meat, look at the pack date. You want meat that's been brought in and packed within the past day or two. Anything past that is likely edible, but not fresh. You can eat it, but look for fresher meat to get the most out of it's flavor, texture, and nutritional value.

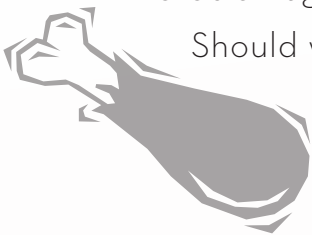


- ✓ **Think of it this way:** If you buy meat that's already been sitting at the grocery store for four days, then you take it home and put it in the fridge for another three days... well, meat is only good in the fridge for five days MAX. You do the math. That said, you can often find great deals on meat that's a few days old. Just be sure to eat it or freeze it within a day!
- ✓ Make sure the meat department does not smell bad. I once lived by a Lucky's that had a meat department that smelled like the city dump. SCARY.
- ✓ Keep an eye on the pack dates and sell-by dates. It's ok to buy meat that's been there a few days, as long as you're aware and are willing to cook or freeze it quickly. Also be wary of meat sales, which often means they've got extra stock that's been hanging out for a while and they're hustling to get rid of it before it goes bad.
- ✓ Do not buy meat if the package has a bunch of liquid rolling around inside. This often means the meat has been previously frozen and thawed, or else it's been damaged by mishandling.
- ✓ Do not buy meat that has any other ingredients besides. . .meat. Seriously. Many large-scale grocery chains inject their meat with all sorts of things, like salt, sugar, water, "natural" colorings and flavorings. They do this for several reasons, the top being that the meat will appear fresh for longer, even if it sits around. Also, adding salt and water to meat increases its sale weight, which means they charge you more (since they sell by the pound). You'll find more details in the individual shopping guides below.

ORGANIC? FREE RANGE? GRASS FED? SUSTAINABLE? LOCAL? OY!

There's a huge conversation going on right now about the quality of the meat we eat.

Should we buy organic? Free range? Does it even matter?



The short answer: If you can afford it, buy organic, free-range meat that has been locally raised and humanely treated. If you can't afford it, do the best you can with what you've got. No one should judge you because of your meat-buying choices.

In a perfect world, all meat animals would live happy, healthy lives until the bummer day the axe falls. They'd have open fields and rays of sunshine, with as much healthy food to eat as they want. The reality is that the vast majority of the meat we eat comes from factory farms and feedlots, which are terrifying operations.

The animals raised in these conditions are horribly mistreated and unhealthy, so the meat industry must compensate for this by injecting animals with antibiotics and hormones to keep them going from day to day. Don't believe me? Just google the terms "chicken factory farm" or "downed cow." (Don't say I didn't warn you.) And don't even get me started on how damaging these meat operations are on our already fragile ecosystem.

Besides the moral and environmental implications of an industry that treats living creatures so badly, this industry standard causes problems that affect us on an individual level. The meats that comes out of factory farms have infinitely more opportunities to become contaminated in their journey to your table, and both the flavor and nutrient quality of the meat are affected by poor treatment, questionable feeding practices, and filthy living conditions.

Basically: Happy meat animals not only taste better, they're healthier for you to eat.

Look, I could rant about this all day, but what it really comes down to is your own personal choice. We all make choices about the food we eat, and what industry we decide to support with our hard-earned dollars. Some days I run to my local butcher to get the best grass-fed organic pork chops I can afford, and other days I duck into Safeway to get a 12-pack of chicken legs for a barbecue.

I wish I could say that I only eat the very best meat on all occasions, but the reality of the situation is that it's not always easy. So I make a decision based on what's available to me in that moment and I own that decision. Ultimately, that's the best anyone can do.

I will say this, though: If you think you can't afford to buy local, humanely-raised meat, consider sacrificing the quantity of meat you buy for quality. In other words, try to buy better meat and just eat less of it to offset the higher price tag. It's healthier for you, the planet, and the good of our world.

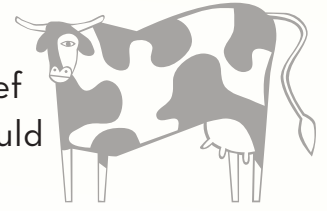
When buying meat, you're looking for the same things regardless of what you're buying: freshness, good color, no smell, etc. This can look a little different depending on the type of meat you're buying, so I've created a printable checklist for each type of meat that you can take with you to the grocery store.

CHICKEN



- ✓ Fresh chicken is ideally pink, sometimes on the beige side. It should not be white or brown, which means it is not fresh. It should be uniformly colored and not spotted.
- ✓ Raw chicken meat should be smooth to the touch, not slimy or sticky.
- ✓ If you touch it, the meat should feel firm and spring back to the touch. If the meat feels hard, dry, watery, or spongy, avoid.
- ✓ The skin should be opaque, not see-through. It's ok if there are a few tears in the skin, but avoid if the skin is totally ripped to shreds.
- ✓ There should not be a lot of blood or other liquid around the chicken, which can mean it was mishandled or was previously frozen.
- ✓ Sometimes you'll see chicken that looks yellow, and this is normally fine. It just means the chickens were fed a corn diet, which colored the fat on the bird.
- ✓ Fresh chicken should not really smell like anything, though it can take on a temporary "farty" smell if it's been closed in a container for a little while. This smell is not very strong and should go away once the chicken sits in the open air for a minute. If a bad smell lingers, avoid!
- ✓ If buying packaged raw chicken, look at the ingredients list. If there is anything in the list besides chicken, avoid. You may see all sorts of things, like sugar, salt, flavoring, and even colorings. Grocery stores add these things to make the meat more attractive and to pad the weight by adding additional liquid (more weight = the more they charge you).

BEEF (AND LAMB, GOAT, ETC)



- ✓ Fresh beef is red, and turns brown as it ages. Avoid buying beef that has turned brown, as this means it's not fresh. Beef should also be uniformly colored and not spotted.
- ✓ Beef fat should be white or cream-colored, not brown, red, or splotchy.
- ✓ Beef should be smooth to the touch and some cuts may have a slightly marbled texture. Beef should never be slimy or sticky.
- ✓ If you touch beef, it should feel both firm and soft, and it should spring back to the touch. If the meat feels tough, dry, soggy, or spongy, do not buy it.
- ✓ If buying beef with bones, make sure the bones are not shredded or changing colors. They should be white and red, not brown all the way through.
- ✓ Fresh beef so have no real smell, and certainly no strong smells.
- ✓ Avoid beef that is covered in blood or sitting in a puddle of water. This means it has been mishandled or previously frozen and defrosted.
- ✓ Look for cuts that been butchered in a smooth, even fashion. Avoid cuts that are ragged, torn, or unevenly sliced, which can mean the meat was mishandled. These flaws will also prevent the meat from cooking evenly.
- ✓ If buying multiple pieces of the same cut (such as buying several tri-tip steaks to cook together) make sure they're all of similar size and thickness. This will allow the cuts to all cook for about the same time, without some being over- or undercooked.
- ✓ Avoid beef that is sold with any additional ingredients, such as salt, sugar, colorings, or flavorings. You may see packages that say the beef is self-basting, enhanced, injected, etc. These are all bad, as it means the store has processed the beef to include additives, which superficially color, flavor, and increase the water content of the meat. They do this so that the meat looks fresher for a longer period of time.

PORK

- ✓ Pork should always be a nice pink color. It should never be white or brown, which means it is not fresh.
- ✓ Pork fat should be white and creamy-colored, not red, brown, or spotty.
- ✓ Pork should be smooth to the touch and some cuts may have a slightly marbled texture. The meat should not be slimy, sticky, or soggy.
- ✓ If you touch pork, it should feel softly firm. It should spring back to the touch. If the meat feels tough, dry, bloated, or spongy, do not buy it.



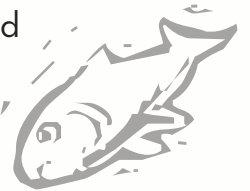
- ✓ If buying pork with bones, make sure the bones are not shredded or changing colors. They should be white and red, not brown all the way through.

- ✓ Fresh pork should not have a smell.
- ✓ If the pork is covered in blood or sitting in a puddle of water, avoid it. This means it has been either mishandled or previously frozen and then thawed out.
- ✓ Look for cuts that been butchered in a smooth, even fashion. Avoid cuts that are ragged, torn, or unevenly sliced, which can mean the meat was mishandled. These flaws will also prevent the meat from cooking evenly.
- ✓ If buying multiple pieces to cook at once (such as several boneless pork chops) make sure they're all roughly the same size and thickness. This will help the cuts to all cook for about the same time.
- ✓ Avoid pork that contains any other ingredients. Keep an eye out for extra additives such as salt, sugar, colorings, or flavorings. Also keep an eye out for words such as marinated, enhanced, injected, and juicier. This means the store has added extra processing to increase coloring, flavoring, or water levels, so they can make the meat appear fresher than it actually is.

FISH

Buying fish is a little different, and ultimately an art unto itself, but here are a few basic guidelines:

- ✓ The place you buy your fish should not smell like fish. Contrary to popular belief, most fresh fish does not have a strong smell. Fresh fish and seafood should have a subtle ocean smell, like salt and sea. If your fish place smells like someone smacked you upside the head with a pungent salmon, shop somewhere else.
- ✓ Try to buy seafood from an actual person, not a wrapped package at the grocery store. Fish does not stay good as long as beef or chicken, so you don't want to eat anything that's been sitting around for a few days (unless it's been frozen, in which case it's likely safe to eat). Buying fish from an actual fishmonger tends to mean it's fresher, but in the event that it's not, ask when the fish was delivered and how long it's been sitting there.
- ✓ Fish should always be kept on ice or in a refrigerated case. If it's not, that's a huge red flag.
- ✓ Fish should be firm to the touch, whether it's whole or butchered. If it's squishy, overly soft, or leaves a dent when you touch it, avoid.
- ✓ Whole fresh fish should be smooth, sleek, moist, and flexible. There should be no curling or drying of the body, nor should there be any stickiness when you touch the skin.
- ✓ Whole fresh fish should have clear eyes that almost look like it's still alive. (Minus the blank stare, which fish kind of have anyways.) The eyes should not be cloudy or puffy, and they should not look like they're filled with gross jelly. Ugh.
- ✓ Shellfish are a little different, obviously, but the big one here is smell. Do you get even the hint of an ammonia smell when you inspect the shellfish? Then run away! An ammonia smell means it's gone bad.



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Get fearless in the kitchen!

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