What Do the Labels Mean?

While most of the claims on meat and poultry labels are defined by the United States Department of Agriculture, the majority are not verified by any third parties. If you're not confident about a brand, ask your butcher for more information and speak to the farm or company itself about their standards and the conditions in which their animals live. The only meaningful labels that are verified by a third party are "organic" (verified by certifiers accredited by the USDA) and "certified humane" (certified by Humane Farm Animal Care), making products with these labels a top pick.

Since the USDA regulations for organic meat came into existence in October 2002, there are increasing choices on the shelves. Markets will respond to demand, so urge your store managers and butchers to stock organic as well as meats from the other labels and brands listed below. The more interest shown, the more likely businesses will take the risk in offering new varieties.

Labels

1. USDA organic—Animals are fed organic feed, are not administered any antibiotics and no irradiation or genetic modification takes place. They are raised under conditions which provide for exercise, access to outdoors and freedom of movement. The USDA allows products that contain all organic ingredients to be labeled as "100% organic," products that contain 95% up to 100% organic ingredients can be labeled as "organic." Claims are verified by third-party inspectors (www.usda.gov).

2. Certified humane raised and handled—Cattle have sufficient space and shelter and must have access to fresh water at all times. They must not be fed hormones or antibiotics and must be treated and handled according to Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) standards. Claims are verified by third-party inspectors (www.certifiedhumane.com). Hogs are raised humanely on independent family farms, where they can behave naturally. They must not be fed hormones or antibiotics, and cannot be fed any animal remnants. Gestation crates are not permitted. Animals must be treated according to standards set by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI). Claims are verified by third-party inspectors (www.awionline.org/farm/).

3. Pastured or grass fed—Cattle are fed on a confined or unconfined system with a grass floor. Claims are not verified by third party inspectors.

4. Free range or free roaming—Poultry are free to roam; however, the use of the term "free range" is only defined by the USDA for poultry production, and need only mean that the bird has had some access to the outdoors each day, which could be a dirt or concrete feedlot. The outdoor area must be 50% of the size of the barn area. How long the bird or animal spend outside depends on the producer and the climate. Claims are defined by USDA, but are not verified by third party inspectors.

5. No antibiotics administered, raised without antibiotics or antibiotic-free—The USDA allows producers to label meat and poultry products with the claims "no antibiotics administered" or "raised without antibiotics." The term "antibiotic-free" is not approved for use by the USDA. Claims are defined by USDA, but are not verified by third party inspectors.

6. No hormones administered, raised without hormones, or hormone-free—Cattle must not receive any hormones during their lifetime. For poultry and pigs, the USDA already prohibits the use of hormones, so in those cases the label only represent the regulations that are already in place. The term "hormone-free" is not approved for use by the FDA. Claims are defined by USDA, but are not verified by third party inspectors.

7. Natural—According to a 1991 USDA memo "natural" is defined as "The product is a natural food because it contains no artificial ingredients and is only minimally processed." This is "perhaps the most misleading" claim according to Jessica Nelson of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, since the

From www.thegreenguide.com The Grilling Guide: Best Meats for Backyard Gourmets
USDA does not exclude meats raised using antibiotics as growth promoters. Claims are defined by USDA, but are not verified by third party inspectors.

Animal Protein Selection, Storage, Handling, and Cooking

Sanitation  Cross contamination happens when germs from raw or unclean foods get onto foods that will not be cooked (or reheated) before eating. Follow these steps to keep food safe from contamination:

- Always store fresh meat, fish, and poultry on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, to avoid cross-contamination by dripping juices.
- Use a hard cutting surface with no splits or holes in it.
- After working with raw meat, fish, poultry, or eggs, wash your hands before touching anything else.
- Wash, rinse and sanitize the cutting surface and all the utensils (knives, etc.) every time you finish cutting raw meat, fish, and poultry. Household bleach is a good sanitizer. Use a capful (1 tsp.) for each gallon of cool water.

Thawing:  There are only three safe ways to thaw foods, and you must plan ahead to allow enough time to do it right:

1. Thaw food in the refrigerator; it may take a few hours or a few days. This is the best and safest way. Be sure to put meat in a container to catch the juices and to keep them from dripping on the food below.
2. Hold the food under cool, running water, never under warm or hot water.
3. In a microwave oven; you must then cook it or serve it right away.

Never thaw food at room temperature or in warm water.

Meat, fish, poultry and prepared foods can be refrozen if they have been kept at a temperature of 40 °F or below and if their color and odor are good. However, quality will be lower.

Cooking

Use an instant-read thermometer to be sure of internal temperature of any cooked meat. Test the center of the thickest part of the meat, being sure to not touch bone while taking the reading. Meats should be cooked to the following temperatures for safety:

- Beef, lamb, and seafood = 140 °F
- Pork = 150 °F
- Ground beef, lamb, pork, and game = 155 °F
- All poultry (including ground) = 165 °F
Red Meat (includes beef, pork, lamb, and game meats) Selection: Organic, hormone & antibiotic free, range fed, wild. Best tasting, most tender beef is marbled and comes from muscles that have done the least work. External fat should be white, not yellow. Muscle should be (naturally) red (not dyed) and firm. Avoid brownish / mushy meat. Storage: Raw steaks and roasts keep 3 to 5 days in the refrigerator at 35 to 40 degrees F. Ground meats will keep 1 to 2 days at the same temperature. Frozen beef and lamb steaks and roasts will keep in the freezer for 6 to 12 months; the same cuts of pork 4 to 6 months. Ground meats keep 3 to 4 months in the freezer. Cooked meats keep 3 to 4 days in the fridge; 2 to 3 months in the freezer. Gravy or broth keeps 1 to 2 days in the fridge; 2 to 3 months in the freezer.

Poultry (includes chicken, turkey, and game birds) Selection: Organic, antibiotic free, free range, wild. Young birds will be the most tender, as connective tissue increases with use and maturity. Light meat like chicken or turkey breast has less fat and also less connective tissue. Storage: Fresh, raw poultry should be used within 1 day of receipt or purchase. Poultry may be frozen whole and will keep in the freezer for 6 to 12 months. Pieces may be frozen for up to 9 months. Cooked poultry covered with broth or gravy keeps 1 to 2 days in the fridge; 6 months in the freezer. Cooked pieces keep 3 to 4 days in the fridge; 4 months in the freezer. Cooked poultry dishes keep 3 to 4 days in the fridge; 4 to 6 months in the freezer.

Seafood (includes shellfish and fin fish) Selection: Wild is best nutritionally; see handout for most sustainable choices. Good fish looks good, has firm, unmarred flesh, and smells like fresh seawater or ocean breeze. Look for red gills, bright, reflective skin, and no browning anywhere. When buying frozen fish, avoid dry, chalky looking flesh – this is a sign of freezer burn. Storage: Fresh fish should be used within 1 day of receipt or purchase. Store in original packaging on a pan of ice in the refrigerator for best results. Fish may be purchased frozen and will keep in the freezer for 3 to 6 months. Do not attempt to freeze fish in a home freezer. Home freezers cannot reach low enough temperatures. Cooked seafood keeps 2 to 3 days in the fridge; 3 months in the freezer.

"To put the energy-using demand of meat production into easy-to-understand terms, Gidon Eshel, a geophysicist at the Bard Center, and Pamela A. Martin, an assistant professor of geophysics at the University of Chicago, calculated that if Americans were to reduce meat consumption by just 20 percent it would be as if we all switched from a standard sedan - a Camry, say - to the ultra-efficient Prius. Similarly, a study last year by the National Institute of Livestock and Grassland Science in Japan estimated that 2.2 pounds of beef is responsible for the equivalent amount of carbon dioxide emitted by the average European car every 155 miles, and burns enough energy to light a 100-watt bulb for nearly 20 days."

Mark Bittman - Rethinking the Meat Guzzler
http://www.truthout.org/issues_06/012808EB.shtml