

An Illustrated Guide to Beef Roasts

Supermarkets carry many kinds of roasts, often with confusing labels. Here's how to know what you are buying, and how best to cook it. BY SHANNON BLAISDELL

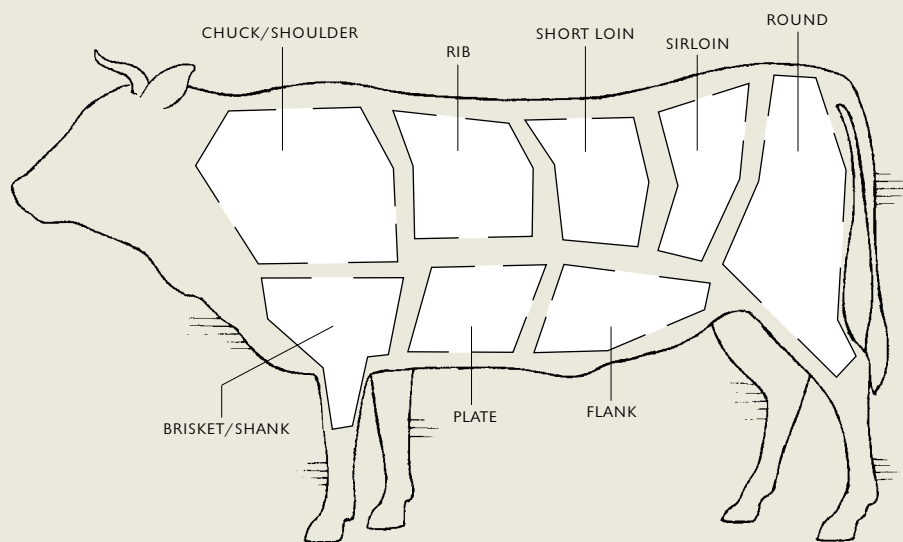
Choosing a beef roast can be an exasperating and confusing endeavor. To help make this job easier, we identified the roasts most often found in the supermarket (as well as their aliases), cooked them in the test kitchen, and evaluated each on a range of qualities, from tenderness to fattiness. We also rated each roast for flavor (★★★★★ being best) and cost (\$\$\$\$\$ being most expensive). Our thanks go out

to Christopher Radley, sales manager of John Dewar & Co., and Mike Lewis, butcher extraordinaire at Star Market. These meat experts helped to guide us through this process.

By definition, a roast is a thick cut of meat that is suitable for cooking by dry heat (roasting) or moist heat (braising or pot-roasting). Tender cuts with little connective tissue respond well to dry-heat cooking. Tougher cuts, which

generally come from heavily exercised parts of the animal, such as the shoulder and rump, respond best to braising (being cooked in a relatively small amount of liquid in a closed container for a long period of time). The primary goal of braising is to melt the collagen in the connective tissue, thereby transforming a tough piece of meat into a tender one.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMAL CUTS



Butchers refer to the first, basic cuts made to an animal as primal cuts. In a cow, there are eight primal cuts, and beef roasts generally come from five of these, listed below.

Chuck The chuck section includes ribs 1 through 5 (the ribs are numbered from the head to the tail) as well as the shoulder blade bone. Roasts from the chuck contain a lot of connective tissue and generally require moist heat cooking to become tender.

Rib The rib section contains ribs 6 through 12. A full 7-bone rib roast, or a whole standing rib roast, can tip the scales at more than 16 pounds, so butchers divide the rib into two

distinct cuts. Both are very tender, very expensive, and generally cooked by dry heat.

Short Loin This part of the cow is usually cut into premium steaks. The tenderloin is the most common roast from the short loin. It is very tender and is usually roasted.

Sirloin The sirloin is sometimes referred to as the hip area. The meat from the sirloin is not as tender as that from the short loin, but these cuts are still generally roasted.

Round Cuts from the steer's butt and leg are tender enough for roasting (though not nearly as tender as the cuts from the rib or the short loin), but they are often braised.

Illustration: John Burgoyne

CHUCK ROASTS

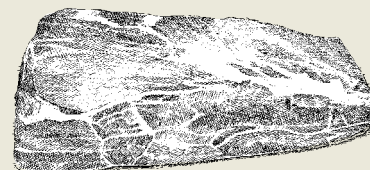
Top Blade Roast

Alternate Names: Chuck Roast First Cut, Blade Roast, Top Chuck Roast

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise



This broad, flat cut was far and away the best chuck roast we tasted—flavorful, juicy, and tender. Its connective tissue is unattractive but not unpleasant to eat.

Chuck 7-Bone Roast

Alternate Names: Center-Cut Pot Roast, Chuck Roast Center Cut

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise



A bone shaped like the number seven gives this cut its name. We enjoyed the deep flavor of this thin cut, which needed less liquid and less time to cook than other cuts from the chuck.

Chuck-Eye Roast

Alternate Names: Boneless Chuck Roll, Boneless Chuck Fillet

FLAVOR ★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise or Roast



This boneless roast is cut from the center of the first five ribs (the term *eye* refers to any center-cut piece of meat). It is very

tender and juicy but was criticized for its excessive fat content.

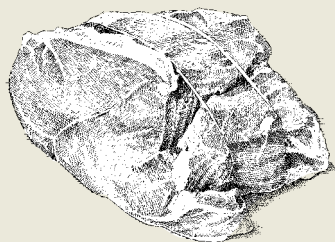
Under Blade Roast

Alternate Names: Bottom Chuck Roast, California Roast

FLAVOR ★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise



We found this roast's flavor to be quite similar to the 7-bone roast, but it had a bit more connective tissue. It also had a fair amount of fat, which enhanced the flavor but made the meat fall apart when carved.

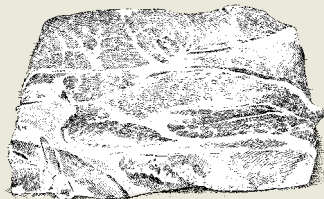
Chuck Shoulder Roast

Alternate Names: Chuck Shoulder Pot Roast, Chuck Roast Boneless

FLAVOR ★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise



Our tasters thought this roast had an unpleasantly chewy, almost bouncy texture and relatively mild flavor.

RIB ROASTS

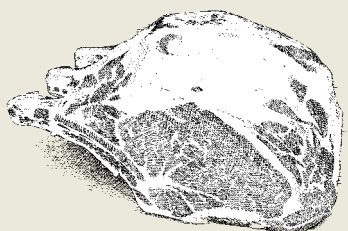
Rib Roast, First Cut

Alternate Names: Prime Rib, Loin End, Small End

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$\$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



This cut consists of ribs 9 through 12, toward the back of the rib section,

closer to the loin of the animal. It contains the large rib-eye muscle and was judged to be extremely tender and flavorful. The clearest way to indicate what you want when you order a rib roast is to ask for "the first four ribs from the loin end."

Rib Roast, Second Cut

Alternate Name: Large End

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$\$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



The large end of the rib roast is cut from ribs 6 through 9. Though it is still an excellent roast, we thought this cut was fattier, a little less tender, and slightly more irregularly formed than the first cut rib roast.

SHORT LOIN AND SIRLOIN ROASTS

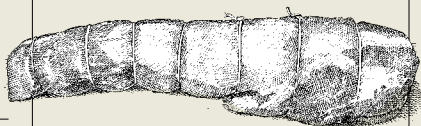
Tenderloin

Alternate Name: Whole Filet

FLAVOR ★★★

COST \$\$\$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



The tenderloin sits just under the spine of the steer, so it gets no exercise and is the most tender piece of beef you can buy. Our tasters found its flavor to be pleasantly mild, almost nonbeefy. Unpeeled tenderloins, which come with an incredibly thick layer of exterior fat still attached, also come with a tremendous amount of waste (the fat should be removed) and cost more (in both time and money) than peeled roasts, which have scattered patches of fat that need not be removed. Even peeled roasts, however, usually come with some silver skin, a sheath of thin, opalesque membrane that must be trimmed.

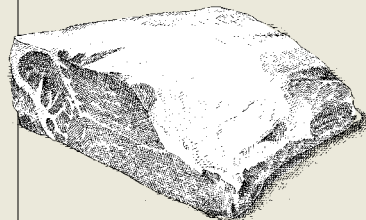
Top Sirloin Roast

Alternate Names: Top Butt, Center-Cut Roast

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



This cut has big beefy flavor. Aside from the vein of gristle that runs through it, which we found slightly unpleasant to eat, the roast was tender and juicy.

Sirloin Tri-Tip Roast

Alternate Name: Triangle Roast

FLAVOR ★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



This cut is popular out West, but butchers on the East Coast usually cut it up into sirloin tips or "steak tips." This small, triangular roast is moist but has a strange, spongy texture and mild flavor.

ROUND ROASTS

Top Round Roast

Alternate Names: Top Round First Cut, Top Round Steak Roast

FLAVOR ★★★

COST \$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise or Roast



This affordable roast is the most common choice in supermarkets. Our tasters liked it, commenting that it was very similar to the top sirloin

roast, with good flavor, texture, and juiciness. We like the top round roast sliced thin because it can be overly chewy if sliced thick.

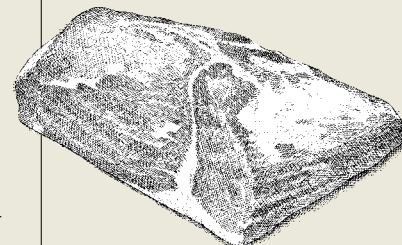
Bottom Round Rump Roast

Alternate Names: Round Roast, Bottom Round Pot Roast, Bottom Round Oven Roast

FLAVOR ★★

COST \$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise or Roast



For the money, we think this cut makes a juicy, relatively beefy roast. It was slightly less tender than the top round roast and should be sliced thin for serving.

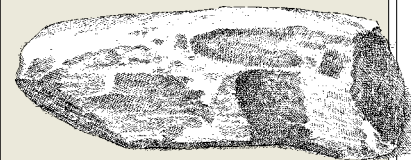
Eye-Round Roast

Alternate Names: Round-Eye Pot Roast

FLAVOR ★

COST \$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise or Roast



This boneless roast had mediocre flavor and was considerably less juicy than any other roast.

Bottom Round Roast

Alternate Names: None

FLAVOR (no stars)

COST \$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise or Roast



This cut was the tasters' least favorite. It was essentially devoid of flavor and had a rubbery, chewy texture. This roast is not worth even the little that it costs.