

## A Brief History of Butchery Charts

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Decades before fancy-shmancy ad agencies were paid jillions of dollars to come up with marketing slogans like "Beef: It's What's for Dinner" and "Pork: The Other White Meat," the meat industry promoted itself through more modest means: little recipe booklets, most of which were published by the National Live Stock and Meat Board.

These booklets, which were published from the 1920s through the '50s and featured titles like 250 Ways to Prepare Meat, Your New Meat Cookbook, Meat Recipes to Please, Medley of Meat Recipes, There's Always Time to Cook Meat, Today's Meat Cookery, All About Meat—are you getting the idea?—were distributed to consumers for free via local retail outlets.

Now, when we say "consumers" in this context, we basically mean housewives. And when we say "local retail outlets," we mean either the butcher shop or the corner grocer, who had a butcher counter within his store. Supermarkets were still a new and fairly limited phenomenon, so consumers couldn't expect to find pre-cut steaks, chops, and roasts waiting for them in plastic-wrapped Styrofoam trays. They had to be able to tell the butcher what they wanted.

That meant they had to understand the various cuts of meat. And THAT meant they had to be educated. And with that in mind, most of these recipe booklets included that most iconic of visual aids: the butcher's chart.

Everyone has seen butchery charts before. There's something mildly but inherently humorous about such charts today—I tend to think of it as a nervous chuckle, and I think it's designed to mask two things going on inside of us: first, the sense of culpability we feel when confronted with the reality that meat does NOT grow in a shrinkwrapped Styrofoam tray, but actually comes from a living, breathing animal; and second, the sense of inadequacy we feel when forced to admit how little we actually know about meat. You're no doubt familiar with the terminology found on these charts—terms like "short loin," "top round," and "flank"—even if you have no idea what they mean or what part of the animal they correspond to. Similarly, most of us have eaten a T-Bone steak, but few of us probably realize what part of the skeleton that bone comes from.

We can afford to laugh about such things. But the housewife of the 1930s had to live on a tight budget during the Depression, and the housewife of the '40s had to deal with war rationing and a husband who may have been fighting overseas, so the butchery chart was no laughing matter to her—she needed information in order to understand what she was buying. So it's interesting to see the various forms that the chart has taken to convey that information—both in those early promotional booklets and in some more recent publications.

I was told that this reading series doesn't allow PowerPoint presentations or anything like that, so instead of I've prepared a series of handouts, which you should all have in front of you. All of the charts in this handout depict a beef steer, just so we're comparing apples to apples. (That will probably be the only non-meat food reference in this presentation, by the way.)

Now then, if you'll please direct your attention to Figure 1. Here we have the simplest, most basic type of butcher's chart: The steer is depicted in full profile, and its major wholesale sections, or primal cuts, are numbered. There was presumably a key or legend that went along with this chart, to tell us what the numbers stood for, but the chart itself has virtually no information to convey other than the fact that the steer can be subdivided into sections.

If we turn to Figure 2, we see the next step: It's essentially the same chart as in Fig. 1, except here the sections are labeled. But can anyone see the main difference between these two charts? [audience interaction]

Moving on now to Figure 3, we see two things: First, the main shape is no longer a full cow—it's now a carcass, with all the extremities removed. And second, this chart shows us the percentage weight of each primal cut.

Figure 4 gives us still more information: Here we're given a sense of which parts of the steer are more and less expensive. There's also a bit of rudimentary information on cooking methods.

Figure 5 represents a breakthrough: This is the first chart we've seen that really tells us what we can do with these primal cuts. It tells us what kind of meat we can get from each area of the steer, and how that meat can be cooked. It doesn't go into a lot of detail, mind you—the word "Steaks" appears several times, but it doesn't tell us what KIND of steaks—but this is still a big step up in terms of educational value.

If you would kindly turn to Figure 6, you'll see an even bigger step. First, note that the carcass is now depicted vertically, hanging from a back leg, which is how it would be encountered in the packing house or butcher shop. And secondly, as you can see, this chart shows exactly what the yield is from each section. So here we have the first chart that really tells us what we're getting.

Figure 7 doesn't really form part a graphic progression, but I included it because it's one of the very few charts I've seen that depicts the steer's skeleton. And to reference the issue I raised earlier, you can see that T-Bone steaks are section 16 on the chart, which corresponds to the animal's back, just below the ribcage. So, yes, the bone in a T-bone is a vertebrae.

If you'll now direct your attention to Figure 8, you'll see by far the most modern and information-packed chart we've seen so far. Here we're told not only which retail cuts come from the various wholesale sections, but we also SEE what they LOOK LIKE. Here we finally get a sense of the connection between the carcass and the food that ends up on our plates.

Figure 9 goes even further, providing an exploded view of the carcass, along with the retail cuts. But this chart doesn't tell us how to cook these various retail cuts, and so, ladies and gentlemen, I give youâ€¦

Figure 10, which is pretty much the whole magilla: an exploded view of the carcass,

illustrations of the retail cuts, and information on cooking methods, all presented clearly and, I might add, enticingly. Let's take a moment to salute the anonymous graphic artist who put together this chart just so we could enjoy the pleasures of bovine flesh.

Now, if you'll look at the progression of these 10 charts, you'll see an increasing emphasis on the retail cuts and a corresponding DE-emphasis on the carcass. That trend is taken to its logical extreme with Figure 11, which is basically just a list of steaks and roasts and information on how to cook them, with a tiny little chart tossed in almost as an afterthought.

If we had to divide these charts into two categories, we could roughly classify them as diagrammatic and illustrative, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. Figure 12 solves this problem by presenting TWO charts—one diagrammatic and one illustrative.

If you'll look at the caption, you'll see that these charts are listed as showing the AMERICAN cuts of beef. And that's an important distinction, because as you can see in Figures 13 and 14, butchers in France and the UK have their own ways of cutting up the steer. Which means even if you've finally waded through enough of these charts to figure out how the American cuts work, you're really just getting started, because then you've got to learn the British and French methods.

Finally, I've included Figure 15, which is the cover of one of my little recipe booklets. It doesn't show a chart per se, but I like how the cow and the pig are depicted with the various primal cuts already delineated on their hides. I don't know if this is how butchers instinctively view any animal that wanders into their field of vision, or if the meat industry was trying to genetically engineer livestock with preprinted cutting lines—I'd like to think the latter. And if that's the case, then it would only be a few more genetic tweaks until we could have this...