

How is ground beef made?

When beef carcasses are cut into steaks and roasts, some smaller pieces result. These are called “trimmings.” Trimmings are simply smaller cuts of beef that resemble various sized chunks of beef stew meat. Some trimmings are lean and some have more fat.

Lean and fat trimmings are blended together in various ratios to produce products such as “80 percent lean/20 percent fat ground beef” or “93 percent lean/7 percent fat ground beef.” Many packages of ground beef indicate what ratio of lean to fat is contained in the product. Under new labeling regulations that will become effective in January of 2012, all ground meats will be required to list the amount of fat contained in the product on the nutrition labeling panel.

Ground beef can be made by grinding a whole muscle such as a chuck roast, but trimmings containing higher levels of fat will typically need to be blended into the product to create a product that has the characteristics of what we commonly consider ground beef. Ground beef, however, cannot contain more than 30 percent fat. When fat is added, it must be attached to some lean meat.

What is hamburger?

Hamburger is a commonly used term for one of America’s favorite foods and is one of the most common menu items in America. Its menu identity involves a grilled or broiled beef burger on a bun, typically with lettuce, tomato and other toppings.

But USDA has a specific definition or “standard of identity” for the raw beef product in the grocer’s case that is labeled “hamburger.” As in ground beef production, making hamburger also involves grinding trimmings, but when making hamburger, pure beef fat (with no meat attached) may be added to the beef, with a maximum of 30 percent fat allowed.

Can anything be added to hamburger and ground beef?

Both hamburger and ground beef can have seasonings added, but no water, phosphates, extenders, or binders may be added. The label will indicate when seasonings are added.

Can cheek meat be used?

Beef cheek meat (trimmed meat from cheeks) is a popular and trendy entrée in many restaurants these days and is sometimes used in hamburger. Cheek meat is just like other beef because it comes from the muscle in the cheek (just as all beef comes from various muscles).

When used, the amount of cheek meat is limited to 25 percent of hamburger. Why? Because cheek meat has a slightly different texture and when used at levels higher than 25 percent, it may create a product that has a different texture than what is commonly considered to be the texture of hamburger.

What are patties?

Patties are beef products that are chopped and shaped into the iconic circular shape that we think of as “a burger.”

Some patties are 100 percent ground beef and will say so on the label. Other patties may be 100 percent hamburger patties and this fact also will be reflected on the label.

“Beef patties” may contain additional ingredients that must be listed on the ingredient statement. These ingredients commonly are binders and extenders such as soy or oat protein that help patties hold their shape and extend meat further. Adding binders and extenders is comparable to adding oatmeal or bread crumbs when making meatloaf or homemade patties. Some patties may have a particular seasoning or flavor such as chipotle, mushrooms or cheese, and these also must be labeled.

In addition, the regulations permit beef byproducts in patties so long as they are labeled in the ingredient statement and included as part of the product name. If beef hearts were added, for example, the product name would be Beef Patties with Beef Hearts. Like many other variety meat cuts, beef hearts are wholesome and nutritious, but they are not commonly consumed by the majority of Americans and for that reason, are not commonly added to beef patties.

What are pre-cooked patties?

Some patties are pre-cooked to their proper temperature so they simply need to be re-heated. This is a very convenient option, particularly for institutional foodservice, vending machines and for those who are enjoying a picnic or campout, where cooking and handling options may be limited.

What is “partially defatted beef fatty tissue (PDBFT)?”

PDBFT is a beef product that is made by melting beef fat at low temperatures and spinning the liquefied fat from the lean with a centrifuge. The remaining product has a low fat content and can be added to patties. This helps ensure that lean meat is not wasted.

Which ground beef product do Americans consume most commonly?

Although precise data are not available, the American Meat Institute estimates that the vast majority of ground beef products are consumed as ground beef.

Additional Information

U.S. Department of Agriculture
www.usda.gov

USDS Meat & Poultry Hotline
1-888-MPHotline
mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov