

A Guide to Buying Fresh Pork

Here's everything you need to know about cooking today's lean pork, including identifying the best cuts and choosing the proper cooking method. BY REBECCA HAYS

The Thinning of the American Pig

In 1985, amid growing concerns about saturated fat in the American diet, Congress created the National Pork Board with the goal of helping producers provide consumers with the leaner meat they desired. Working with the board, producers developed new breeding techniques and feeding systems aimed at slimming down pigs. As a result, pigs are now much leaner and more heavily muscled than they were 20 years ago, with an average of 31 percent less fat. This is good news for our waistlines, but much of the meaty flavor, moisture, and tenderness disappeared along with the fat, causing some cuts of fresh pork to taste like diet food. For this reason, choosing the right cut and the right cooking method make a big difference when preparing today's pork.

TASTING: Enhanced or Unenhanced Pork?

Because modern pork is remarkably lean and therefore somewhat bland and prone to dryness if overcooked, a product called enhanced pork has overtaken the market. Enhanced pork is injected with a solution of water, salt, sodium phosphates, sodium lactate, potassium lactate, sodium diacetate, and varying flavor agents to bolster flavor and juiciness, with the total amount of enhancing ingredients adding 7 percent to 15 percent extra weight. The Pork Board claims that the purpose of enhancement is not to improve inferior meat but to boost the overall quality of the product. Pork containing additives must be so labeled, with a list of the ingredients.

After several taste tests, we have concluded that while enhanced pork is indeed juicier and more tender than unenhanced pork, the latter has more genuine pork flavor. Some tasters picked up unappealing artificial, salty flavors in enhanced pork. Enhanced pork can also leach juices that, once reduced, will result in overly salty pan sauces. If you want to add moisture and flavor to a dry cut, buy unenhanced pork and brine it at home (that is, soak the meat in a saltwater solution).

TASTING: Modern versus Old-Fashioned Pork

We purchased center-cut pork chops from New York farmers who raise heritage breeds the old-fashioned way (the animals roam free and are fed wholesome, natural diets) and tasted them alongside supermarket chops. Tasters had an interesting response to the farm-raised pork, noting that while it was juicy, with significantly more fat than the supermarket chops, it also had unusual "mineral" and "iron" flavors. Some tasters also found that the extra fat in the old-fashioned pork left behind an unpleasant coating in their mouths. Surprisingly, most tasters favored the more familiar supermarket meat. A few tasters thought that the old-fashioned pork was delicious but definitely an acquired taste.

We wondered just how fatty this old-fashioned pork was and so sent a sample pork butt to a food laboratory to be ground and analyzed for fat content. For comparison, we also sent a supermarket sample of the same cut. As we expected, the old-fashioned pork butt had significantly more fat—50 percent more—than the supermarket butt. Old-fashioned pork chops had 210 percent more fat than the supermarket samples, but this sky-high fat level was probably due to differences in the way the two kinds of pork were trimmed; supermarkets tend to remove most external fat; pork farmers who raise heritage breeds do not.

Primal Cuts

The term "primal cuts" refers to the basic cuts made to an animal when it is initially butchered. Butchers turn primal cuts into the chops, roasts, and other cuts sold at the retail level. Retail cuts from the same primal cut generally share similar traits, so when shopping it helps to understand the characteristics of the five primal cuts of pork.

BLADE SHOULDER

ARM SHOULDER

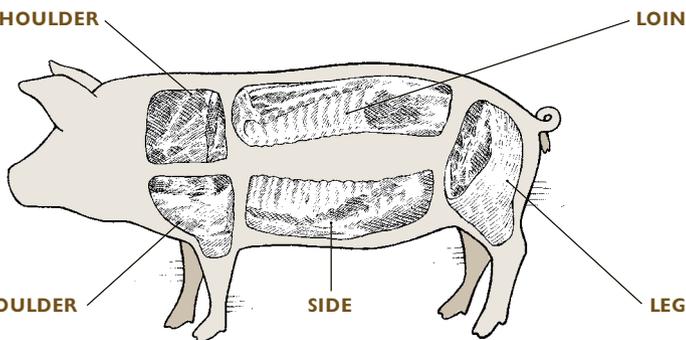
BLADE SHOULDER

ARM SHOULDER

LOIN

SIDE

LEG



BLADE SHOULDER Cuts from the upper portion of the well-exercised front legs of the pig tend to be tough, with a fair amount of fat. Shoulder cuts require long, slow cooking to become fork-tender.

ARM SHOULDER The economical arm, or picnic shoulder, has characteristics similar to the blade shoulder. Shoulder hocks (used primarily as a flavoring agent in soups, slow-cooked greens, and stews) also come from this part of the pig, whereas ham hocks come from the hind legs of the animal.

LOIN Butchers divide this area between the shoulder and the leg into some of the most popular cuts of pork, including pork chops, tenderloin, roasts, and ribs. Because the loin area is so lean, these cuts are prone to dryness.

SIDE The side, or belly, of the pig is the fattiest part, home to spareribs and bacon.

LEG The leg is sometimes referred to as the ham. Ham can be wet- or dry-cured or sold fresh, as a roast. Our favorite cured hams are sold bone-in and spiral-sliced.

Retail Cuts

We tested 15 common cuts of fresh pork in the test kitchen to determine our favorites and find the best ways to cook them. We rated the cuts for flavor (★★★★ being the best) and cost per pound (\$\$\$\$ being the most expensive). We'd like to thank John Dewar, owner of John Dewar & Co. Quality Meats in Newton, Mass., and Ceci Snyder of the National Pork Board for sharing their expertise with us.

BLADE SHOULDER

Pork Butt

Alternate Names: Boston Shoulder, Pork Butt Roast, Boston-Style Butt

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Barbecue, Braise, Roast



This flavorful cut, which is often used for pulled pork, has enough fat to stay moist and succulent during long, slow cooking. It is often sold boneless and wrapped in netting, as pictured above.

ARM SHOULDER

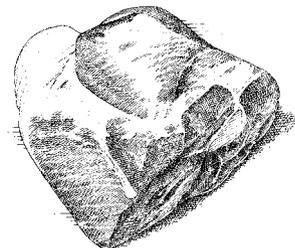
Shoulder Arm Picnic

Alternate Names: Picnic Shoulder, Fresh Picnic, Picnic Roast

FLAVOR ★★★★★

COST \$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Barbecue, Braise, Roast



This affordable cut contains its fair share of fat and rind, but the meat has potent pork flavor and becomes meltingly tender with cooking. Picnic roasts are sometimes sold skinless and boneless.

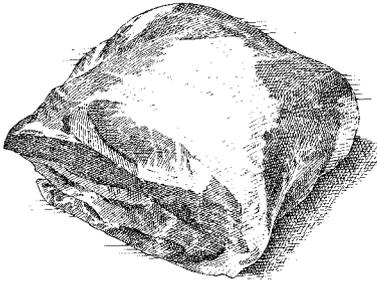
LOIN

Blade Roast

Alternate Names (Bone-In Cuts):
Pork 7-Rib Roast, Pork 5-Rib Roast,
Pork Loin Rib End, Rib-End Roast

FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Braise



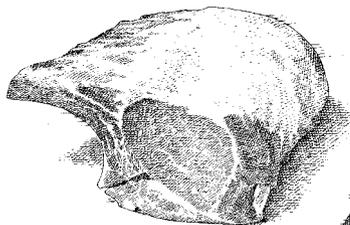
The part of the loin closest to the shoulder, the bone-in blade roast can be difficult to carve because of its many separate muscles and fatty pockets. We prefer the boneless version of this roast.

Center Rib Roast

Alternate Names: Rack of Pork,
Pork Loin Rib Half, Center-Cut Roast

FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



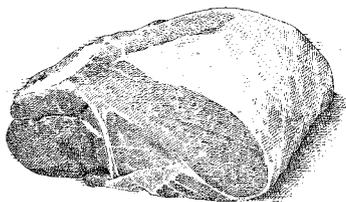
Often referred to as the pork equivalent of prime rib, this mild, fairly lean roast consists of a single muscle with a protective fat cap. It may be cut with anywhere from 5 to 8 ribs.

Center Loin Roast

Alternate Names: Center Cut,
Loin Roast Center Cut, Pork Roast

FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



This popular roast is juicy, tender, and evenly shaped, with somewhat less fat than the center rib roast. As pictured,

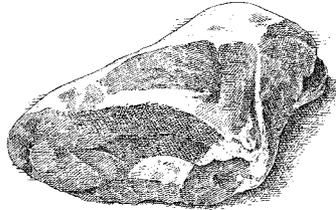
this roast is sometimes sold with the tenderloin attached.

Sirloin Roast

Alternate Name: None

FLAVOR No stars
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Not recommended



This sinuous cut with a good amount of connective tissue is difficult to cook evenly and to carve.

Tenderloin

Alternate Name: None

FLAVOR ★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Roast, Sauté,
Grill, Stir-Fry



Lean, delicate, boneless tenderloin has little marbling, cooks very quickly, and can dry out faster than fattier cuts.

Baby Back Ribs

Alternate Names: Loin Back Ribs, Riblets

FLAVOR ★★★★★
COST \$\$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Barbecue



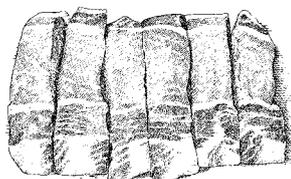
These ribs, cut with 11 to 13 bones, come from the upper end of the rib cage closest to the backbone. They are lean, tender, and smaller than other ribs. Choose meatier racks, preferably those weighing more than 1¾ pounds.

Country-Style Ribs

Alternate Name: Country Ribs

FLAVOR ★★★★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Barbecue, Braise



These meaty, tender ribs are cut from the upper side of the rib cage from the fatty blade end of the loin. Butchers

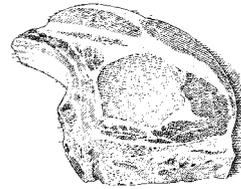
usually cut them into individual ribs and package several together.

Blade Chops

Alternate Name: Pork Chop End Cuts

FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Not recommended



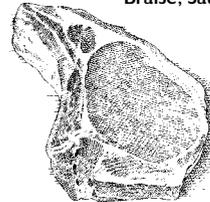
Cut from the shoulder end of the loin, these chops can be difficult to find at the market. They are fatty and tough, despite good flavor and juiciness.

Rib Chops

Alternate Names: Rib Cut Chops,
Pork Chops End Cut

FLAVOR ★★★★★
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Pan-Sear and
Roast, Grill,
Braise, Sauté



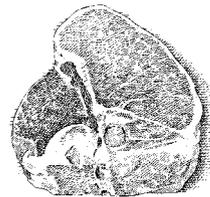
Our favorite chops are cut from the rib section of the loin. They have a relatively high fat content, rendering them flavorful and unlikely to dry out during cooking. Rib chops can be distinguished by the section of rib bone running along one side.

Center-Cut Chops

Alternate Names: Top Loin Chops,

Loin Chops
FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Pan-Sear and
Roast, Grill, Braise,
Sauté



Identify these chops by the bone that divides the loin meat from the tenderloin muscle, as in a T-bone steak. The lean tenderloin section cooks more quickly than the loin section, making these chops a challenge to

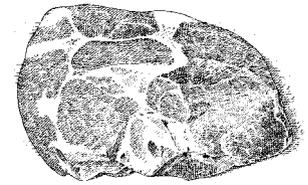
cook. They are sometimes available boneless and may then be referred to as America's cut.

Sirloin Chops

Alternate Name: Sirloin Steaks

FLAVOR No stars
COST \$\$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Not recommended



These chops, cut from the sirloin, or hip, end of the pig, are tough, dry, and tasteless. The chops contain tenderloin and loin meat, plus a slice of hip bone.

SIDE

Spareribs

Alternate Name: St. Louis-Style Ribs

FLAVOR ★★★
COST \$\$\$\$

BEST WAYS TO COOK Barbecue, Braise



These fatty, succulent ribs are cut from the underbelly, or lower rib cage. A full rack contains 13 ribs and weighs about 3 pounds. St. Louis-style ribs are prepared by removing the brisket (shown on the left side of this illustration) so that the rack is more rectangular.

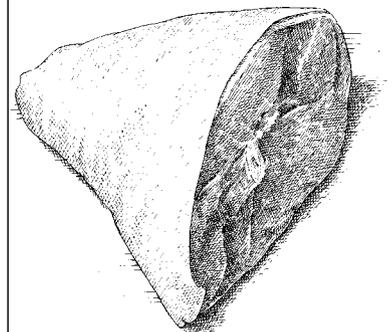
LEG

Fresh Ham

Alternate Name: Fresh Leg

FLAVOR ★★★★★
COST \$\$

BEST WAY TO COOK Roast



Fresh ham is not cured. We prefer the shank end (shown here) over the rounded sirloin (butt) end because it is easier to carve.