

# Black Ink: The Dynamic Duo

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**T** rue or false: To get past a fork in the road, you have to choose between turning left or right. Okay, that's true. Some things really are – as the song goes – “black or white, one way or another.”

But is there really a war over deciding for tenderness versus marbling?

Marketers try to sell what they have, even if it's not the most complete product on the market. The phrase “guaranteed tender” may sound like it's all that matters, the one true path to great meat.

But that's not all there is. Eating experience is not independent of another important factor: intramuscular fat, or those tiny flecks of flavor found in high-quality beef. They add juiciness and make beef taste like, well, beef. Consumers can have both highly marbled and highly tender beef, if they don't get tunnel focused on the latter.

Research from Colorado State University shows that tenderness and “buttery, beef-fat” flavor accounts for 91 percent of the variation in overall sensory experience.

Marbling score plays a big role. It accounts for 40 percent of tenderness variation and 71 percent of variation in that desirable flavor.

This proves that they're not independent factors, but rather interdependent. The people buying your end product want it all and

they depend on you to deliver.

Breeding and management decisions that favor higher quality grades are typically supportive of tenderness, too. They can easily be achieved in tandem.

If a restaurant has good food, but poor service your odds of returning are slim. When you find both in the same package then you've found a winner, perhaps a new favorite hang-out.

That's the way it is with consumers and their protein purchases. They want a piece of meat that can be cut with a butter knife, but it must be packed with flavor, too. It has to be worth it. Otherwise, all chicken is pretty much guaranteed tender at a fraction of the price.

So what does that mean to you?

Don't let some label claim or sales pitch lead you to believe anyone can define beef quality with tenderness alone. Instead, keep a focus on beef quality as it relates to marbling. You can select breeding stock to include that trait, reduce stress at key management points and market your calves in a way that rewards you for all of that. Almost everything you do (and don't do) can have an impact. Weigh options, calculate, but don't give up.

The entire beef industry stands to benefit when you've got it right. After all, you need not worry about competing proteins when there's really no competition on all the points that really matter.  $\Delta$

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