

Dry Aged vs. Wet Aged

There are two ways to age beef: dry and wet.

Dry aging is the practice of hanging an entire beef, side of beef or certain primal cuts (e.g. rib, loin) in a controlled, refrigerated environment for several weeks. The temperature must remain between 32 and 36 degrees F. Too warm, and the meat will spoil; too cold, and the meat will freeze, halting the aging process. Humidity is tightly regulated, and there must be constant circulation of air.

In addition to the tenderizing and flavor-enhancing effects created by the meat's natural enzymes, the dry aging process promotes the growth of certain mold species on the meat's surface. The molds produce enzymes of their own which contribute to flavor and tenderness...and while actually seeing this process could be a little disturbing, the growth is dutifully scraped off before the beef is sold.

The time investment and space required to dry age beef makes it expensive, of course...but it's the loss of water weight that puts it over the top. Dry-aged beef can lose 30% of its weight by water loss; while this concentrates the "beefy" flavors, it also makes each cut weigh less. That 10-ounce rib eye steak now weighs only 7 ounces, yet the supplier must still sell it based on its original weight...and still factor in the cost of aging. Or, to look at it another way, a 10-ounce dry-aged rib eye once represented 14 ounces of the original rib roast, meaning the supplier gets fewer steaks out of a rib section. That's why, some 30 years ago, the meat industry developed a new—and less expensive—way of aging beef...

Wet aging consists of vacuum packing beef—either primal or sub-primal cuts—in plastic (cryovac) and letting it age in a refrigerator. The meat is packed in its own juices, allowing its natural enzymes to break down connective tissues...but without the fluid loss or mold growth of dry aging. Of course, there's a tradeoff: you won't get the concentration of flavors caused by the reduction of water weight or the added funky flavor created by the mold, but the beef retains its original weight (and its value), and the flavor and tenderness are still greatly improved. No wonder wet aging has become the dominant method by far, representing upwards of 90% of aged beef in the U.S. In fact, if a meat supplier does not specify "dry aged," you can assume the beef is wet aged. Any supplier going to the expense and risk of dry aging is going to make sure you know about it.