



Rabbit from Farm to Table

*F*resh or frozen, rabbit meat is sold all year round. It can be used in most of the ways in which chicken is used. Like other lean meat, poultry, and fish, rabbit meat is a good source of high quality protein. The meat is fine grained and mild flavored. Rabbits sold in the United States for food are commonly crosses between New Zealand and Belgian varieties, imported Chinese rabbits, or Scottish hares.

How Are Rabbit Products Commonly Labeled?

- **Fryer** or **young rabbit** — the terms “fryer” or “young rabbit” refer to a rabbit weighing not less than 1 1/2 pounds and rarely more than 3 1/2 pounds, and less than 12 weeks of age. The flesh is tender, fine grained, and a bright pearly pink color. These rabbits may be cooked in much the same way as young poultry.
- **Roaster** or **mature rabbit** — the terms “roaster” or “mature rabbit” refer to a mature rabbit of any weight, but usually over 4 pounds and over 8 months of age. The flesh is firm and coarse grained, and the muscle fiber is slightly darker in color and less tender. The fat may be more creamy in color than that of a fryer or young rabbit. The meat of larger rabbits may be tougher so the best methods of cooking are braising or stewing.
- **Giblets** — the liver and heart.

How Is Rabbit Inspected?

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) inspects swine, cattle, sheep, and goats. Under the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), the FSIS inspects “domesticated poultry” which is defined as chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guineas, ratites, and squab.

Congress has not mandated inspection of rabbits under either the FMIA or the PPIA; therefore, inspection of rabbit is voluntary. Voluntary inspection of animals, including buffalo, antelope, reindeer, elk, deer, migratory water fowl, game birds, and rabbit, is handled under the Agricultural Marketing Act. Under voluntary inspection, each rabbit and its internal organs are inspected for signs of disease. The “Inspected for Wholesomeness by USDA” mark of inspection ensures the rabbit is wholesome and free from disease. When a rabbit processor does not produce rabbit meat under FSIS voluntary inspection, they would be subject to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspection under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act.

Some States, however, permit the sale of rabbit only if it is inspected under their laws.

The FDA has jurisdiction over the shipment of rabbit meat in interstate commerce.

Is Rabbit Graded?

Yes, rabbit may be graded under the voluntary rabbit grading program performed by the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. It provides a national grading service based on official U.S. classes, standards, and grades for poultry.

Rabbit may be graded **only** if it has been inspected and passed by the FSIS, or inspected and passed by any other inspection system which is acceptable to the USDA, such as State inspection.

Consumer grades for rabbits are U.S. Grade A, U.S. Grade B, and U.S. Grade C.

Are Hormones and Antibiotics Used in Rabbit Raising?

Antibiotics may be given to prevent or treat diseases in rabbits. A "withdrawal" period is required from the time antibiotics are administered until it is legal to slaughter the animal. This allows time for residues to exit the animal's system.

No hormones are used in rabbit raising.

Safe Storage Times

Take rabbit home immediately from the grocer and refrigerate at 40 °F or below. Use it within 2 days or freeze at 0 °F. If kept frozen continuously, it will be safe indefinitely; however, quality will diminish over time. It is safe to freeze rabbit in its original packaging. For prolonged storage, overwrap as you would any food for long-term storage. For best quality, use frozen whole rabbit within a year; pieces within 9 months.

Safe Thawing

There are three ways to safely defrost rabbit: in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave oven. Never defrost at room temperature.

- Refrigerator: It's best to plan for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. Bone-in parts or whole rabbits may take a day or longer to thaw. Once thawed, rabbit may be stored in the refrigerator for 2 days before cooking. During this time, if you decide not to use the rabbit, you can safely refreeze it without cooking it.
- Cold Water: To defrost rabbit in cold water, do not remove the packaging. Be sure the package is airtight or put it into a leak-proof bag. Submerge the rabbit in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes so that it continues to thaw. Small packages may defrost in an hour or less; larger packages may take 2 to 3 hours. Plan to cook the rabbit immediately after thawing by the cold water method.
- Microwave oven: When defrosting rabbit in the microwave oven, **plan to cook it immediately after thawing** because some of the areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook.

Safe Cooking

- When roasting rabbit parts, set the oven temperature no lower than 325 °F. A 2-pound, cut-up rabbit should take approximately 1 hour to cook.
- A whole, 2- to 2 1/2-pound rabbit should take about 1 to 1 1/2 hours to roast. Stuffing it will add approximately 1/2 hour to the cooking time.
- Braising rabbit (cooking it in a small amount of liquid in a covered pan on the range or in the oven) also takes about 1 hour. Rabbit can be broiled about 15 minutes on each side.
- For safety, USDA recommends cooking rabbit to an internal temperature of at least 160 °F. The use of a food thermometer is recommended to make sure that your rabbit is safe to eat.
- It is safe to cook frozen rabbit in the oven or on the range or grill without defrosting it first, although the cooking time may be about 50% longer.
- Do not cook frozen rabbit in a slow cooker; thaw first. Cut whole rabbits into smaller pieces so heat can penetrate the meat more quickly.

Safe Handling of Leftovers

- Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours after cooking. Use within 3 to 4 days or freeze.
- Use frozen, cooked rabbit within 4 to 6 months for best quality.
- Reheat leftovers to 165 °F.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline** or **1-888-674-6854**, TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST (English or Spanish).

Listen to timely recorded food safety messages at the same number 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at **www.fsis.usda.gov**.

Send e-mail questions to **MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov**.

The hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7



www.fsis.usda.gov