

*Guide
to...*

Mince ...



how to handle, store and cook

MLA's research shows mince is one of the top three cuts of meat purchased by home cooks each week. That's not surprising really, as mince is reasonably priced, extremely versatile and kids just love it.

What's in a name?

The names and categories for minced meat vary from supermarket to supermarket and from butcher to butcher. Premium, gourmet, lean, star ratings, Heart Smart, best and choice are just some of the terms used by retailers to describe the differing categories. These labels can be confusing for home cooks, particularly when they're shopping for the lowest fat choices, because the different terms contain varying degrees of fat.

Consumers are advised to:

- **Check the label** – packaged mince that is labelled lean, extra lean, Heart Smart or diet must have the fat content clearly marked on the label.
- **Ask their butcher** – what the percentage ratio of fat to meat is in the minced meat.

Food Standards Code for fat content of mince

Part five of the meat standard from the Food Standards Code covers the labelling of mince that makes a fat claim (i.e. lean, reduced fat). The code set by Food Standards Australia New Zealand requires a mandatory fat declaration where a reference is made to the fat content of minced meat.

The code reads:

Where express or implied reference is made in relation to the fat content of minced meat, the maximum proportion of fat in the minced meat, expressed in g/100g, must be

- (a) *declared on the label or package of the food; or*
- (b) *where the food is not required to bear a label - (i) displayed on or in connection with the display of the food; or (ii) provided to the purchaser upon request.*

Guide to...



Which mince to choose?

The number of mince options available means that home cooks can make the best choice for them based on health, meal type or budget. As a guide it's best to choose from the mid to top end options – lean, extra lean, 5 Star and Heart Smart are excellent choices for both good health and eating quality.

Matching mince to the appropriate recipe

Leanest grades of mince are the best choice for health but a slightly higher fat content will give a better end result in some recipes.

- The leanest mince is the best choice for bolognese sauce.

- The mid-range grades are good for burgers, meatballs, kofta and meatloaf because the little extra fat will keep them moist.

How to handle and store mince

When it comes to handling mince it is very important to maintain good food safety habits to eliminate contamination. Most contamination occurs on the surface of meat, as the internal tissue is sterile. The greater the surface area exposed, the more chances for bacteria. When meat is minced, bacteria on the outside can move to the inside.

- Do not store fresh mince any longer than necessary. Refer to use-by dates for packaged mince and use well within that time. Unpackaged mince is best used within one or two days of purchase.
- Freeze mince you don't intend to use. Mince can be frozen for two to three months. Rather than freezing unpackaged mince in a roundish shape as bought from the butcher, lay it out flat to freeze. This allows the mince to both freeze and thaw evenly.

- Thaw frozen mince (or any meat) on the lowest shelf in the fridge, away from any ready-to-eat food.
- Only thaw mince in the microwave if you're cooking the mince immediately after.
- Never refreeze thawed mince (or any meat) without cooking it first.

Cook mince right through

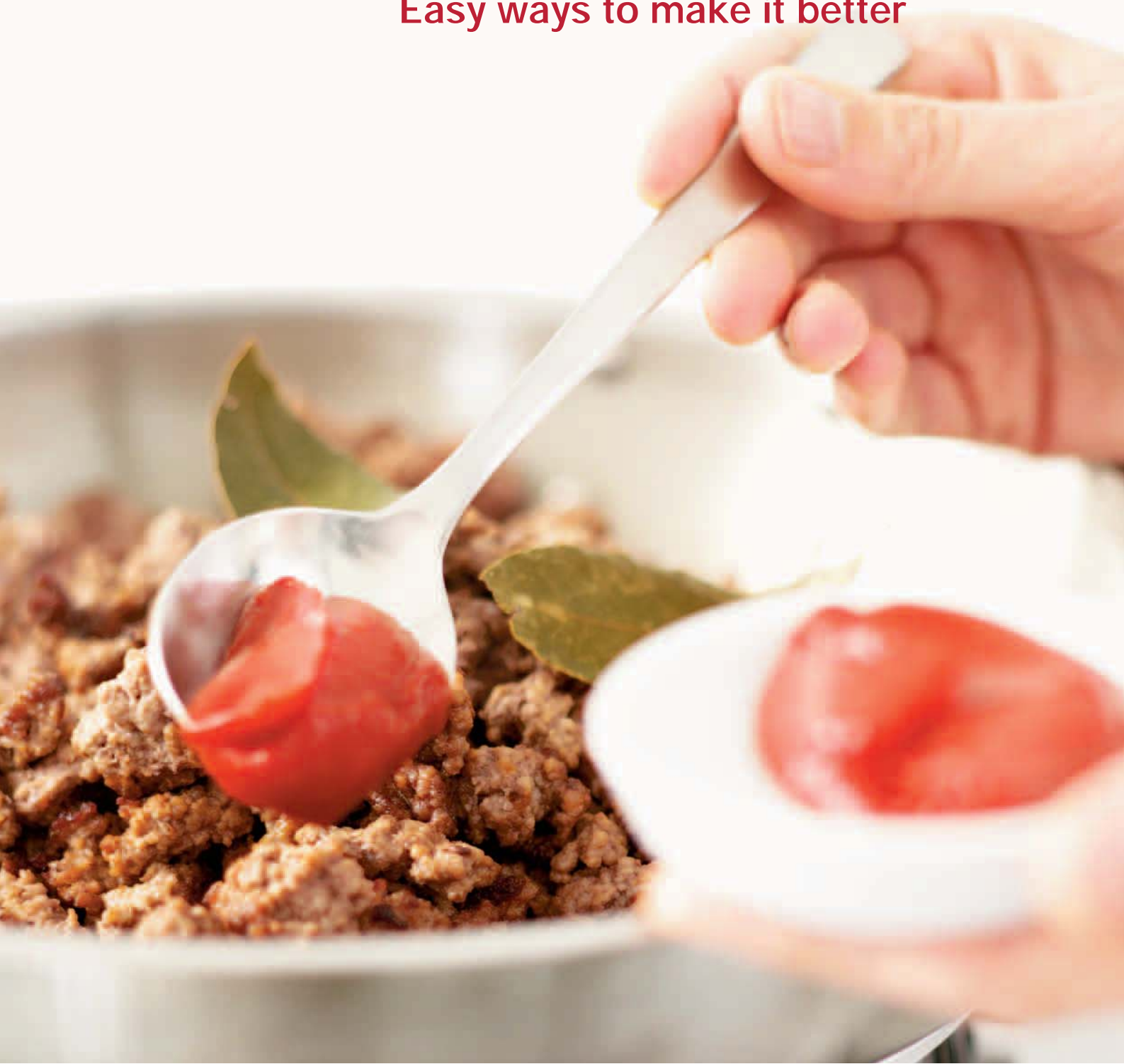
Many consumers are unaware of how important it is to cook mince until it is no longer pink.

- Be particularly careful with hamburgers or meat patties. They should be thoroughly cooked to an internal temperature of 75°C; not served undercooked, rare or pink. If a meat thermometer is unavailable, a guide to ensure meat patties are cooked is that the juices run clear when a skewer is inserted into the thickest part.
- Meatloaf can still appear pink on the inside though cooked to well done. This is due to the nitrates in the ingredients often used in meatloaf, such as onions, celery and red capsicum. To make sure, use a meat thermometer – the internal temperature should be about 75°C.

*Guide
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Cooking with mince

Easy ways to make it better



1 Three tips to a great bolognaise sauce

Remove any fat and water from mince

To start the sauce, heat a pan until moderately hot and add a batch of mince, being careful not to crowd the pan (crumble the mince over the pan rather than adding it in one clump). Let this first side of the mince sear lightly before using a fork to break up the larger pieces. As the mince cooks, tilt the pan slightly and spoon away the liquid; this helps brown the mince and also ensures the sauce does not have a fatty taste. Alternatively, tilt the pan and blot the liquid up with a wad of folded kitchen paper, held in tongs.

Brown the mince carefully

The mince should be browned before adding the flavourings. Once the liquid has been removed from the pan and any residue has evaporated the mince can then begin to brown. It will begin to cook fairly quickly at this stage, so keep it moving to ensure it browns evenly but does not dry out.

Repeat the steps with any remaining batches of mince.

Reducing the sauce adds depth of flavour

Return all the mince to the pan with sauce ingredients. The mixture should simmer uncovered for at least 45 minutes to ensure good depth of flavour – don't hurry the process. If it reduces too much and becomes dry, add half to one cup of water. The completed sauce should have enough body so that the liquid does not separate when it is added to the pasta. It should not be too thick either; the meat sauce should coat the pasta, rather than sit as a thickish lump on top.

A note on the ingredients

Use coarsely ground mince rather than very finely ground mince for the best textured sauce. Use a mixture of one-third veal to two-thirds beef mince for a subtler flavoured meat sauce. For the same reason use a finely chopped onion in the sauce and not garlic. Take a tip from the Italians when they make a ragu – they add about ½ cup milk (or cream) and a pinch of nutmeg to the sauce in the final 15 minutes of cooking. The milk will lessen any sharpness or acidity from the tomato and make the bolognaise smooth in flavour.



2 Mixing and shaping burgers



Bolognaise and burgers, meatloaf and meatballs are family favourites. Here are MLA's hints for cooking these much-loved mince dishes.

Achieving the right consistency by hand mixing

Season your mince mixture with herbs, sea salt flakes, lemon rind etc. Hold the bowl with one hand and lightly mix the meat with the other (rotating the bowl as you mix). Use your fingers rather than the palm of your hand to thoroughly combine the flavourings and achieve a good consistency.

Don't overwork the mince mixture – it should cling together but not be pasty. Over-kneading will make the mixture too compact, and the burgers will be tough.

Take care when shaping the burgers

Dipping your hands in warm water will make the burgers easier to shape.

Handle the mixture gently, use a light touch and don't make them too compacted. Rather than a dense burger, which is difficult to cook well, aim for a loosely formed patty that holds together but is not too compressed.

Take about three-quarters of a cup of the mince mixture and form each into a ball, then flatten the ball top and bottom. Don't squash the patty into a flattened disc.

About 2-3cm is the best thickness for a burger; any thicker and they may not cook through. At this size and shape the burger will cook through to the middle without becoming dry on the outside.

Adding a filling such as a small cube of cheese is a lovely surprise filling for burgers. To stuff the burger, form the ball and then press a cavity in the middle with your thumb. Add the filling (make sure it's not too large or it will seep out as the burger cooks) then encase the mixture around it.

Postscript ... cooking burgers

- Oil the burgers rather than oiling the pan or barbecue grill.
- Preheat the pan or barbecue grill to moderately hot before adding the burgers; they should sizzle when you place them on the heat.
- Never use a spatula to flatten the burgers as they cook, you'll squeeze the meat juices and moisture out.
- Burgers should always be thoroughly cooked; they should not be served undercooked, rare or pink. The internal temperature should be 75°C. A good guide is to insert a skewer into the thickest part; if it is ready to eat the juices will be clear.



3 Keeping meatloaf moist



For ease use a loaf-shaped dish

Cooking the meatloaf in a loaf dish gives a soft-sided result and a well-coloured crusty top.

To keep the meatloaf moist, cover the dish with a sheet each of baking paper and foil. Together they trap the heat and moisture. Pull the foil and paper back a couple of times during cooking and drain away the liquid to stop the meatloaf stewing rather than baking.

Adding colour, flavour and moistness with a glaze

Two-thirds of the way through the cooking time, remove and discard the paper and foil. Drain away any remaining liquid. Pour over a glaze to add colour and additional flavour. An easy store cupboard glaze is made from brown sugar and tomato sauce. This mixture will colour the exposed top, and as it cooks further the top will become a little sticky and crusty. Don't worry if the glaze runs down the sides of the dish – it will add colour and flavour.

To serve hot, slice the meatloaf in thickish slices straight from the dish. When it's cold the slices can be cut thinner.



4 Making meatballs tender

Choose ingredients for tenderness and moisture

Rather than using dry breadcrumbs in a meatball mixture (which can make dry meatballs) use coarse Italian bread (or even white sliced bread) with the crusts removed. Tear the bread into pieces and thoroughly moisten with a good splash or two of milk and a small dash of olive oil. Let the bread stand for a few minutes to absorb the milk and oil. Use your hand or a fork to mash the bread into a smooth mixture.

Meatballs made with this style of bread mix will be soft and tender. Take care when shaping and cooking them, they need gentle handling. Stand for 30 minutes in the fridge after shaping to help firm them before cooking. They are best cooked by carefully spooning into a gently simmering sauce. If you prefer to fry them, dredge with flour before cooking so they don't spatter or stick to the pan.

Keep the size of the meatballs consistent

Bring the meatball mixture together with your hands. It will need a little more mixing than for burgers but don't overknead it. The mixture is ready to shape when it will hold together, leaving the sides of the bowl clean.

Shaping the meatballs with wet hands makes it easier to roll them. Mould them gently by rolling the mixture between your moistened palms. Keep the size consistent so each batch can cook evenly and in the same time – the size of an unshelled walnut is ideal.

