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How Americans Like Their Steak

By [Walt Hickey](#)

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Prime rib with baked potato and green bean almondine on the cruise ship Nina's Dandy.

Scott Suchman / The Washington Post

Are risk-averse people more likely to order their steak well done?

I have no idea; I tried to find out and got absolutely nowhere. But — reinforcing our commitment to full disclosure (and my personal quest to never miss an opportunity to discuss the superiority of rare steaks) — here's the story.

DataLab has been [playing around](#) with SurveyMonkey Audience polls. It's always nice to have fresh data to work with, and there's a sense of satisfaction in running actual experiments, particularly when

it comes to settling frivolous arguments I have about the definition of [the Midwest](#) or [the moral superiority](#) of the Girl Scouts of America.

I prefer steak cooked so that it could very well recover from its wounds with proper bed rest. And I look back at the time in my life when I ordered steaks medium-rare, in my mid-teens, and realize I lacked a sense of commitment. So, why do people order their steaks incinerated?

It stands to reason, from this side of medium, that one reason people prefer tougher, less juicy steaks is the threat of food-borne illness. Everyone has a different threshold for risk, whether they jump out of airplanes or exceed the speed limit. So, on May 7 and 8, we ran a survey testing how 550 people interpret and evaluate risk — do they speed in traffic, smoke, go skydiving, prefer a riskier lottery? — and then asked them how they prefer their steak, if at all.

After getting the data back, I was excited to see the results. I checked the [crosstabs](#), which are usually a simple place to start. There was nothing. I ran regressions to try to tease out any relationship between risk-taking behavior and steak rareness. Nada. Then I checked to see whether gender, age or income had any effect. The relationships were so statistically insignificant, it's laughable. At least in this small survey, there does not appear to be any relationship between people's risk thresholds and how they like their steak cooked.

Here's one example. We asked respondents, "Consider the following hypothetical situations: In Lottery A, you have a 50 percent chance of success, with a payout of \$100. In Lottery B, you have a 90 percent chance of success, with a payout of \$20. Assuming you have \$10 to bet, would you play Lottery A or Lottery B?"

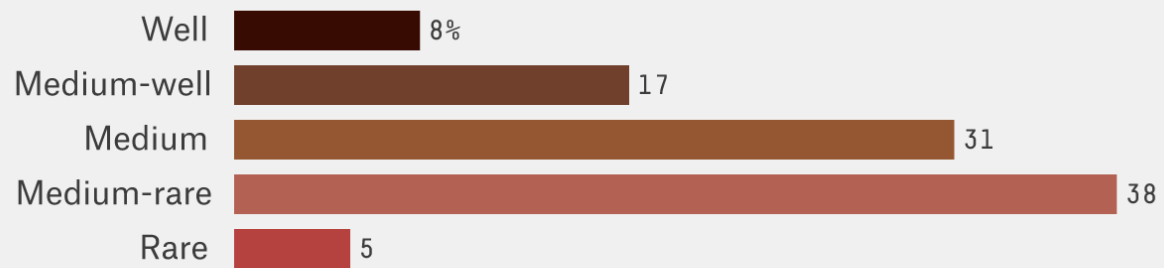
I thought that maybe people who picked "Lottery A," the riskier lottery, would be more likely to prefer their steak rare. Not so much.

STEAK PREFERENCE	RESPONDENTS WHO CHOSE THE RISKIER LOTTERY	RESPONDENTS WHO CHOSE THE SAFER LOTTERY
Well	7 . 7%	9 . 0%
Medium-well	16 . 4	18 . 1
Medium	35 . 7	25 . 8
Medium-rare	35 . 3	41 . 2
Rare	4 . 8	5 . 9

Still, if there's anything to be gained from this futility, it's this chart indicating how respondents preferred their steak. The vast majority — 69 percent — like it somewhere in the ballpark of medium, with about twice as many people preferring medium-rare to medium-well.

'How Do You Like Your Steak Prepared?'

From a survey of 432 steak-eating Americans



FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

SOURCE: SURVEYMONKEY

Anyone have a solid hypothesis for why some people like their steaks scorched and desiccated (besides, you know, taste)? I'm out of ideas. Let me know in the comments.

[Here's the data to download.](#) Let me know whether you find anything good.

Walt Hickey was FiveThirtyEight's chief culture writer. [@WaltHickey](#)

Comments

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