

What Do "Grade A", "Full Grain" and "Genuine Leather" Mean From an Indian Tannery?



Yash Khatri

Founder, SourcingFrom

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"Full grain" tells you the grain layer was left on, not which part of the hide or how clean it is. "Genuine leather" only tells you it is leather. "Grade A" is a tannery's own sorting label with no shared meaning. Small orders often get the selections left after bulk buyers have taken theirs. Name the tannery, the tannery's article and the selection with a written defect allowance, and check the bulk against a retained sample.

The Short Version

- "Full grain" is a layer, not a quality. Full grain belly is still belly.
- "Genuine leather" says it is leather and nothing more. Bonded leather is not leather under US guidance unless its make-up is disclosed.
- One Indian seller's "Grade A" allows one or two small defects in the most visible part of the hide.
- Small lots tend to get the lower selections because tanneries sell their best in bulk.
- Name the tannery, its article name and the selection, with a defect map and a thickness range.

Less than you'd hope. "Full grain" says the top layer of the hide was left on, but not which part of the hide it came from or how many marks it carries. "Genuine leather" says only that it's leather. And "Grade A" means whatever that tannery's sorting room means by it, which can include visible defects. What you actually get depends on the tannery, its own name for the leather, the selection you're sold and the size of your order, so those are the things the purchase order has to name.

A leatherworker put the first point bluntly in 2025: "Full grain leather can mean the cheapest, ugliest and least robust leather like belly" (forum, January 2025). Another, asked where to find good leather in India, said to "buy from suppliers who clearly mention the tannery, leather type, thickness, and tanning method rather than simply listing 'genuine leather'" ([r/Leathercraft](#), June 2026). Our [leather bags checklist](#) and [leather bags from India](#) both tell you to define the grade with a defect map. This page explains what the three labels really cover, why small buyers land on the lower selections, and how to write the leather so it can't drift.

SourcingFrom Intelligence

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- 01 **One Indian seller's "Grade A" allows defects where you'll see them.** The seller defined it as "1 to 2 small defects in the prime, most visible areas of the hide". The buyer replied, "With A grade leather the expectation is of minimal blemishes, but this was not the case." ([r/Leathercraft](#), [September 2025](#) · *Supplier-stated, buyer Reported*)
- 02 **Small lots get what's left.** Leather workers in India say tanneries "export all the good stuff in bulk to large companies. What's left over is the bad quality stuff", and that better tanneries "only sell in bulk". ([r/Leathercraft](#), [June 2025](#) · *Reported, two voices, with a counter-voice*)
- 03 **US guidance treats grade and thickness as claims.** The FTC's leather guides call it deceptive to misrepresent "the kind, grade, quality, quantity, material content, thickness, finish" of a leather product, and say bonded or reconstituted leather "should not be represented, directly or by implication, as being leather" without disclosure. ([16 CFR 24.1 and 24.2\(f\)](#), *read 18 Oct 2026*)

What we don't know yet

- How Indian tanneries' selection grades compare with each other. Each uses its own, and none we found publishes its definitions.

1. What Does "Full Grain" Actually Promise?

A layer, not a quality. A hide is thick enough to be split into layers. The top layer carries the grain, the tight outer surface with the animal's pores. Full grain means that surface was left as it was, not sanded. Top grain or corrected grain means it was buffed and coated to hide marks, which is why it often looks smoother and shinier. The layer underneath, the split, has no grain at all and is sold as suede or coated to look like grain.

So full grain is a real and useful word. It just doesn't tell you two things you care about. It doesn't say which part of the hide it's from, and the belly is looser and stretchier than the back. And it doesn't say how many marks it carries, because by definition nothing was sanded off to hide them. Full grain from a clean hide is the best leather there is. Full grain from a scarred belly is full grain too.

2. And "Genuine Leather"?

It means the material is leather. That's all. In the trade it's often used for split or heavily corrected leather, because a seller with better leather usually says so. One buyer on a forum summed up the shopper's view of the phrase: "genuine leather" "means not leather again" ([Hacker News, August 2019](#)). That's unfair to the term, but it shows how little it buys you.

The real line to watch is between leather and things made from leather. Bonded or reconstituted leather is ground fibre bound with other materials. It's a legitimate material at a lower price. Under US guidance it shouldn't be described as leather without disclosure, and the FTC's own example of a fair label is "Bonded Leather Containing 60% Leather Fibers and 40% Non-leather Substances" ([16 CFR 24.2\(f\)](#)). Customs won't help you here, as our bag checklist notes, because the handbag tariff line covers leather and composition leather together. Your spec has to.

3. What Is "Grade A" in an Indian Tannery?

A selection, sorted by that tannery. After tanning, hides are graded by eye for the marks they carry: healed scars, scratches, insect and tick marks, brand marks, growth lines, holes and cuts made during flaying. A tannery sorts them into its own selections, often lettered or numbered, with an unsorted mix sold under names like "tannery run". The letters aren't standard. One tannery's A is another's B.

What matters is where the marks are and how much of the hide you can cut. A hide with two small marks in the middle of the back, the prime area, gives fewer clean panels than one with the same marks near the edge. That's why the Indian seller's definition upset the buyer. One or two defects sounds like a clean grade until you learn they're allowed exactly where a bag front is cut.

So never accept a letter alone. Ask the tannery or your maker for its written definition of the selection you're quoted, and compare it with what your bag needs.

4. Why Do Small Orders Get the Lower Grades?

Because the best selections are sold first, in bulk, to buyers who take thousands of square feet. Leather workers describe the result plainly, as in our second intelligence point, and one asked of the better tanneries, "Isn't their MOQ in 1000s of sqft?" ([r/Leathercraft, September 2026](#)). There's a fair counter-voice too: one buyer's first good leather came from a furniture maker's stock, and panel sellers now offer small cuts from named tanneries. That last claim is self-interested, but it shows the route.

For a small foreign brand this has three practical answers.

- **Buy through a maker who buys in bulk.** A bag factory that cuts for larger customers can draw your leather from its own better lots, as our [leather](#)

and footwear page suggests.

- **Accept a lower selection on purpose.** Price it with the cutting waste in mind and put the marks where they don't show, on gussets, linings and the back of straps.
- **Test the lot, not the showroom.** The swatch you were shown is the tannery's best foot forward. Approve a sample cut from the lot that will go into your order.

5. What Should the Purchase Order Name?

Three names and four measures.

- **The tannery.** Its legal name and location, even if you buy through a bag maker.
- **The article.** The tannery's own name or code for the leather, which fixes the hide, tannage and finish recipe together. "Brown full grain" can be ten leathers. An article code is one.
- **The selection.** The tannery's grade, with its written definition attached.
- **A defect map.** Which panels must be clean, which may carry small healed marks, and which may carry more.
- **Thickness.** A range in millimetres, by panel, measured at several points.
- **Species and tannage.** The animal matters as much as the grade, and buffalo, goat or cow explains why.
- **A retained sample.** Cut from the approved lot and kept by you, with bulk judged against it.

If you sell in the US, check your marketing words against the leather you've specified. The FTC guides cover grade and thickness claims as well as composition, so "full grain" or "Grade A" in your listing has to be true of what you ship.

6. How Do You Check What Arrived?

Take bags from several cartons and look at the visible panels against your defect map. Measure thickness at a few points with a gauge. Look at a cut edge: full grain shows a tight grain layer over a fibrous core, a split shows fibre right to the surface under any coating, and bonded leather has no real fibre structure at all. Rub the surface gently with a damp white cloth to check the dye, as on the [bag checklist](#).

If you want someone at the tannery to confirm the article and selection, or at the cutting table to check which panels came from where, [SourcingSync](#) does that for foreign buyers.

Questions Buyers Ask

Is top grain better than full grain? ^

No. Top grain is usually grain leather that's been lightly sanded and coated. It's more uniform but less durable and less characterful.

Is "genuine leather" fake? v

Can I ask an Indian tannery for its grading rules? v

Why did my second order look worse than my first? v

7. Back to the Seller's Definition

"1 to 2 small defects in the prime" wasn't a lie. It was the seller's honest definition of a word the buyer understood differently. That's the whole

problem with leather grades in one exchange. Replace the label with names and measures, the tannery, the article, the selection and a defect map, and both sides are finally talking about the same hide.