

# READING THE LABELS for Healthful Eating

by Amanda Kraft

Imagine your weekly trip to the grocery store. You're armed with your list, and you've checked it twice. But, how sure are you that the food you'll come home with will be naughty or nice? We've all stared at a sea of food packaging labels for minutes at a time, desperately trying to discern which brand is the most nutritious and delicious choice for our families. Unfortunately, however, what may go unnoticed is the most important text of all: the fine print. Here's a crash course on label reading and some tips that will hopefully make your next trip to the store a little less daunting.

Let's start off by addressing the almighty ingredients list—that which

you want to see included and that which you don't. There are certain things to watch out for, such as overly complicated, foreign-sounding chemical names. This may seem obvious, but I've found that the general rule is if a 7-year-old can't read it, you shouldn't eat it. This process of careful selection can get a little tricky, however, as there are some ingredients that sound bad, but are really good for you, such as lactic acid. Yes, it is true that some of this comes from cow's milk—so if you're trying to avoid dairy, you might be initially put off by it—but lactic acid is also commonly derived from beets. In other words, it's a perfectly natural thing to allow in your food, but you

might not be able to tell the source of the lactic acid.

Of course, there are also things you'll find in the ingredients list that sound dandy, but are really rather bad for you. Anything with the word "enriched" or "refined" in front of it is something to be avoided, since enrichment or refinement involves adding chemicals or stripping out natural elements. Don't be fooled. Sure, these terms make you think of cultivation and purity, but are just careful, deceptive wording of manufactures. And, let's not forget about the more ambiguous terms you'll come across while shopping such as "trace amounts" and "natural flavors" of which you should always be wary. Ask yourself: trace amounts of what, what makes up the "flavor" and where does it come from?

Overall, there is one main feature you're looking for in an ingredients list: simplicity. If the list of ingredients is longer than five to seven items, you might question the quality. Usually, anything listed in addition to the main ingredients are preservatives, and these additives are not necessary if the food

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is properly stored, maintained and sold fresh. The next thing you should check after the length of this list is its order. Generally speaking, the further down an item is located on the list, the less of it you are eating. Keep this in mind, because cheap fillers should be avoided just as ardently as nasty preservatives.

Finally, reading and understanding the US Food and Drug Administration's nutritional facts label is also important in your search for the most nutritious and delicious foods with which to stock your pantry. The most commonly overlooked detail on this label is serving size. It's very important to remember that the rest of the facts listed depend greatly on the amount, however small, you are expected to eat in one sitting. Fat content, carbohydrates and protein are all typically misread because people don't recognize or follow the portion size noted at the top of the label.

For many of us, as I mentioned before, the modern-day grocery store can be a pretty scary place. Fortunately, for those of us trying to consume only the best and most natural foods, there are quite a few companies and organizations out there trying to challenge the rather lax food and drug standards in this country. Unfortunately, until the quality of all foods available in the US are held to higher standards, we will all have to be a little persnickety in drafting our weekly grocery lists. When trying to make your way through each aisle of the local grocery with items that are nutritious, delicious and of top quality, being an informed consumer certainly helps.

*Here's a brief explanation of what the following labels on your packaging mean. Remember, while these terms may be helpful in determining the quality of your groceries, they are not necessarily something you can rely on all the time. Eating healthfully is trendy these days, and many companies are claiming to be more onboard with this movement than they really are.*

**USDA Certified Organic:** That little green and white circle that is on your groceries means that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has confirmed that the product has been grown without the use of harmful chemicals and genetic modification. There are also degrees of USDA certified "organic" listed on most food products, so be sure to check the percentage accompanying the term.

**Organic:** USDA certification is not the only way to tell if food was processed in a way in which you would approve. There are other organizations interested in providing you with pure, top-quality foodstuffs, such as the Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA), the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), and other regional, nonprofit agencies that are looking out for your best interest.

**Natural:** This means that while the product may not be certified, certain measures have been taken to avoid "unnatural" processing. That is, the food has undergone little or no processing and contains no chemical additives. Whole Wheat or Whole Grain: This means that the cereal grains included in the product contain cereal germ, endosperm and bran. Most refined grains only retain the endosperm.

**Gluten Free:** Gluten is the protein found in many grains, including wheat, rye, barley, spelt, kamut, oat and semolina. Gluten-free products use substitutes to these grains.

**Wheat Free:** Foods that are labeled wheat free, literally do not contain any wheat products. Other grains, however, may still be included in the ingredients, which means gluten may still be an issue. I repeat, wheat free does not necessarily mean gluten free.

**Vegan:** This means that no part of the product includes foods derived from meats, dairy or eggs. Nothing in this food item should have an animal product within it.

**Vegetarian:** As compared to "vegan" foodstuffs, "vegetarian" on a package usually means that the product does not include foods derived from actual meats or meat broths.

**Kosher:** Kosher, or "parve," as seen on some packaging most simply indicates the product meets the dietary laws found in the Hebrew Bible.