

Food - What's Behind The Label

by: Melissa Piper
Associate Editor

Years ago when many families, baked their own bread, churned their own butter and butchered their own animals for meat, there was little need for outside inspection and grading of the food, for each family was responsible for the purity and grade. If problems occurred, it was also the family's responsibility to find out just what might have happened.

However, as industry swept the country, more people depended on others not only to raise food for their consumption but also to process it into edible forms. As processed food became more and more required and available, the need for assurance of quality and purity seemed evident. Not until the early 20th century however and the investigative reports of the muckracking novelists such as Upton Sinclair did the government begin to intervene in the food processing industry.

Since that time, many laws have been passed both on the national and state level to control and inspect the quality of processed foods and meats insuring the best quality for the American consumer.

In the past decade consumers have voiced many complaints concerning the American food industry and have encouraged even more detailed analysis of just products are being used in processed foods and the nutritional value of such.

Thus, not only have the supermarkets changed in appearance today but also the containers, bottles and packages that our food comes in. On many labels are now found the list of ingredients, inspection or grade notifications, nutritional values of the ingredients and even some forms of unit pricing.

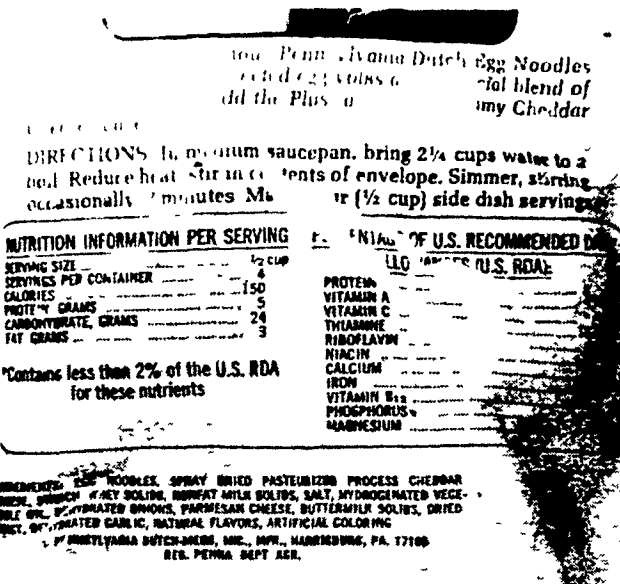
For the average shopper, many of these markings are somewhat confusing and often ignored since they seem irrelevant to the food itself; however, much of the information on the label does serve a useful purpose and once understood can aid the consumer in insuring they have purchased a fresh and quality tasted product or food.

One of the most common and frequently noticed of all information on foods is the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grade shields. The shields are mostly found on meat such as lamb, turkey, beef, poultry and also on butter and eggs. It appears only on those foods that are officially graded according to the Federal grades of quality.



Buying food might seem like a difficult task now, but consumers should use all available methods

including the information provided on labels to purchase exactly what they want.



Nutritional labeling on food packages can aid the consumer by explaining in what amounts protein and nutrients are contained in the food product.

To insure quality they often employ individuals to participate in test panels before actual production of an item begins and while it is being produced many companies have their own quality control personnel on hand to monitor the processing.

The Food and Drug Administration has set up standards to insure that processed foods clearly indicate what the food product is while state administrations often inspect the products for wholesomeness.

Labels must show the ingredients of the package beginning with the item weighing the most, the net weight of the product, the packers and distributor's name along with any inspection notices.

If a picture is used on the label, it must conform to the product within the container. For example if a meat product shows a certain number of slices or portion on the label, the same amount must be contained within the package. If any garnishes are used that are not in the product itself, an explanation such as "serving suggestion" must be indicated.

Often identifying codes that relate to the time and type of production are also printed on the label or elsewhere on the package.

It is a good idea to read the label carefully to make sure you are purchasing just what you want. A little extra time is involved yet it may be very well worth your while to do so.

Nutritional Labeling

Much of the food placed on grocery shelves today, bear a chart outlining the nutrients and their values found in the food itself. This trend came about only a few years ago when consumers felt they should know just what nutritional qualities were contained in the food they were purchasing.

Not only does nutritional labeling allow consumers to know what amount of protein, carbohydrates and vitamins are contained in the food but also gives information on the calories contained in a serving.

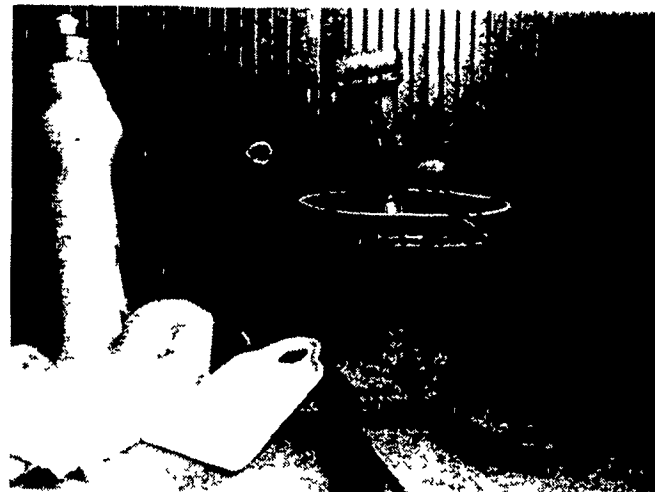
Nutritional labeling is voluntary although any food product which boasts extra nutritional values must label their ingredients.

If nutritional labeling is used, the servings per unit and the size of the individual serving is usually shown. The United States Recommended Daily Allowance values are also usually listed for clarity. Those nutrients listed include protein, carbohydrates, fat (to the nearest gram) along with vitamins A, C, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, calcium and iron. These nutrients are shown as a percentage of the United States Recommended Daily Allowance.

Unit Pricing

Other standards or markings which may appear on food often include unit pricing and open dating.

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To insure health in the family, wash all utensils and cutting boards thoroughly with a hot sudsy water solution especially after contact with raw meat and poultry.

Country Corner

with: Melissa Piper
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Learn By Mail

Stuck in the same old rut of everyday living? Why not try something a little different for a change. The Pennsylvania State University offers a host of correspondence courses in agriculture, family living and community development. Whether you'd like to study sheep management, flower arranging or personal grooming - the College of Agriculture offers a host of courses suited to a variety of needs.

For more information on the courses offered write to Correspondence Courses, 307 Agricultural Administration Building, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa 16802.

Pet Care

Today more than ever before there are more and more pets, which means that your local veterinarian may not have as much time to spend with your individual pet as he once did.

As a pet owner you should be willing to take on some of the responsibility of pet care once delegated only to the veterinarian.

For example if you own a dog why not try learning some simple techniques to care for the animals. Have your veterinarian or a qualified person teach you how to trim your dog's nails, and bath and clip the animal.

These procedures will give your veterinarian and his assistants more time to care for sick and injured animals. The time you spend with your animals will also help them feel confident and relaxed.

Grading is not mandatory and is not required by federal law however to be granted grading services, packers and producers must meet strict requirements for sanitation and cleanliness.

Federal grading began over 50 years ago and has become quite widespread over the subsequent years with many food processors using the services.

Under the USDA grading system, meat is classified according to quality. The most familiar to most consumers is probably the grades of beef of which there are 8 ranging from prime to canner.

Poultry although graded is usually not sold as fresh meat with a grade less than A. Grade A usually represents a bird that is meaty and better than average in appearance.

Another USDA grade familiar to most consumers is the grade which appears on eggs. Eggs usually are graded with the letters AA, A, and B which represents the quality of the food.

Eggs graded AA usually have high rounded yolks with upstanding whites that do not spread out. These eggs should be used when appearance is important such as fried eggs and breakfast foods.

A-eggs are similar to AA quality although they might have slightly less rounded yolks and whites that spread out further.

Lower grades of eggs such as B classified eggs most frequently have thinner whites and flattened yolks. These eggs are better used in baked goods where the appearance is not as important.

Many dairy products often carry USDA grades with the most frequent being butter. Butter graded AA is usually the best quality with a sweet flavor and aroma and a smooth texture. The A grade is similar to AA but may have a slightly less sweet aroma. Grade B butter often exhibits a slightly acid flavor and is not readily used for spreading butter.

Since many fruits and vegetables are sold wholesale or as fresh items they often do not obtain USDA grades. If requested, the processors may have the produce federally graded according to color, size, shape and maturity. The grade usually affixed is either Fancy 1 or Fancy 2 according to the quality.

Food Labeling

Labeling foods has a three fold protection for the consumer. It helps to clarify the standards of identity set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA); defines what certain foods really are and what they contain and also allows the USDA to define levels of quality.

Most food processors are interested in producing only the best quality of food for consumers.