Fuzzy rules govern "natural" claim on food labels

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Most people would agree that nutritious kale in its most pristine and unprocessed form is the epitome of a natural food. Grown in the earth and shipped to the market with little to no packaging or labels needed, fresh, green, leafy kale surely is about as close to natural as you can get.

But suppose we buy that same kale in a crispy, dehydrated version that comes in a resealable bag. Now suppose the kale has added "cheezy" flavoring. Suddenly, it starts to sound like just another processed snack food. But what if the nondairy "cheeziness" is vegan and comes from cashews, sesame seeds and nutritional yeast—and organic yeast at that? Is the product natural? And what if an antioxidant is added to preserve freshness and extend shelf life—still natural now? In other words, at what point does a food leave the territory of all natural and become artificial, synthetic and ultimately not natural?

That's a complicated question.

The term "natural," not unlike beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. That may be why, to date, the U.S. government has bailed on defining what foods can be labeled natural, except in a few narrow categories. To fill that void, food companies have attempted to self-define natural, at the peril of sparking lawsuits. Ultimately, though, consumers are left on their own to navigate the natural foodscape—replete with its official and unofficial labels, marketing lingo and buzz words.

Choosing among items labeled "natural" or "all natural" or "100 percent

natural" is at times a trying exercise. In our attempts to eat more simply and healthfully, we face a glut of labels that don't easily point us toward better nutrition. What's clear is the "natural" conundrum is not going away any time soon. Sales of natural and organic foods and beverages are expected to ring in at nearly $80 billion by 2015, according to the market researcher Packaged Facts.

Beetle Juice

To tackle the prickly question of what foods are natural, let's begin with what is defined. First, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has guidelines for labeling meat and poultry products, saying that a product may be called "natural" if it contains no artificial or synthetic ingredients, including flavors, flavorings, colorings or chemical preservatives. This definition, though, was never intended to apply to labeling any foods other than meat and poultry products.

Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has steered clear of defining what foods are "natural," although FDA statements suggest the agency does not object to the use of the term if the food does not contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances. The agency does offer some guidance around what constitutes a natural flavoring, saying it is "a substance extracted, distilled or otherwise derived from plant or animal matter and whose significant function in food is flavoring rather than nutritional."

But the FDA doesn't use the term "natural" when it comes to defining color. Instead, it separates colors into those that need to be inspected and certified (manufactured ones) and those that don't (ones derived from plant, animal and mineral sources).

That leaves a lot of leeway in what can be considered a "natural" coloring, as Starbucks customers found out when they learned that their

beloved strawberry smoothies got their red hue from ground-up cochineal beetles, a government-approved food coloring found in products from yogurt to snack cakes. Beetles are as natural as the earth itself, but for Starbucks customers, at least, ground-up beetle parts are a nonstarter. Starbucks quickly changed its coloring agent to lycopene, a phytonutrient found in tomatoes.

To confuse the situation even more, consumers have to sort out "natural" versus "organic." Unlike the term "natural," "organic" does come with a reasonably clear set of definitions, thanks to the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. Organic growers must avoid chemical ripening, food irradiation and genetically modified ingredients and organisms (GMOs). Pesticides are allowed as long as they are not synthetic or artificial.

In the United States, federal legislation defines three levels of organic foods. Products made entirely from certified organic ingredients and methods can be labeled "100 percent organic," while products with at least 95 percent organic ingredients may be labeled simply "organic." Both of these categories are allowed to display the USDA Organic seal. A third category, consisting of products with a minimum of 70 percent organic ingredients, can be labeled "made with organic ingredients," but may not display the USDA Organic seal.

When it comes to price, 59 percent of U.S. consumers say they are willing to pay more for natural/all-natural foods, while only 49 percent are willing to pay more for organic, according to Leatherhead Food Research. Ironically, it appears consumers are willing to pay more for an item tagged with a loosely defined marketing term than for one backed by formal regulations.

So what do consumers expect from the natural foods? Surveys done by the market research firm Mintel found that more than 60 percent of U.S.

consumers agree with this statement: If a product is labeled all natural, it's healthy. And yet many baked chips, air-popped chips and multigrain snacks touting "natural" or even "all natural" claims on the front of their packages are not exactly health foods. Just because something—such as a stick of butter—is natural by some definition doesn't mean it is inherently healthful.

And just because something is derived from a natural source doesn't mean it is actually "natural," at least not in the way the consumer is probably thinking. Consider vanilla. During the global vanilla bean shortage in the early 2000s, food manufacturers turned to synthetic vanillin, which can be derived from wood pulp, as a substitute.

While there are now reportedly ample supplies of the real thing available from the vanilla crops in Madagascar and other regions, some suppliers are continuing to produce cheaper vanillin from wood pulp, an arguably "natural" substance. The problem is that the consumer who reads "naturally sourced" on a label is probably picturing a ripe vanilla pod, not wood waste.

The reality is most of us are looking for foods and beverages that are close to what we would grow and prepare for ourselves—if only we had unlimited time, money and farmland. For those of us who don't have these luxuries, here are some guideposts.

Eat a diet rich in whole fruits and vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains. It had to be said. In other words, don't let debates over "natural" derail a whole-foods diet. Whether your corn chips are labeled "natural" or not, it is best to enjoy them occasionally and not as a dietary staple.

Embrace the fact that many foods require processing to make it from the field to our plates, and processed foods can offer

important nutrients. Take soy milk, a processed beverage that provides a third or more of your daily vitamin B12, an important vitamin only found naturally in animal products. Worry less about minimal or maximal food-processing distinctions. Instead, focus on consuming more of the healthful nutrients you want from whatever mix of processed and unprocessed foods makes sense day to day when you factor in convenience, price and taste.

Look past the "natural" and related marketing language on the front of the package and pay more attention to the ingredients listed on the back. Choose products with fewer ingredients and with ones you generally recognize. At the same time, don't assume an unfamiliar ingredient is bad. If the product is one you want to consume regularly, take some time to learn about any of its less familiar ingredients from credible sources.

Next, look at the Nutrition Facts panel on the package. Pay extra attention to those nutrients with a daily value at or well above 100 percent. That may be a sign that the nutrients, even the naturally occurring ones, were amped up or "fortified" by the manufacturer.

Purchase organic foods and beverages if you want and you can afford them, but be assured that conventional growing methods also offer equally safe and nutritious foods.

As for the "cheezy" kale, my advice is to just eat it. More nutrient-rich kale is a good thing, no matter how you bake, dehydrate, process or blend it.

Provided by Tufts University