

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Read the Label!

Richard Emerson

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About the Author

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READ THE LABEL!
DISCOVER WHAT'S REALLY IN YOUR FOOD

RICHARD EMERSON

Vermilion
LONDON

To Elsie-Louisa for her love, support and encouragement

FOREWORD

Food is essential to human life, yet the choices offered by the food industry bring many challenges. Consumers are bombarded with information on what to eat and what not to eat from advertisers and food labels. The reality, however, is that most consumers have to make quick decisions when food shopping, and they often switch off and fall back on established habits or half-remembered advice from ill-informed sources.

Transparent and truthful labelling is therefore vital if consumers are to be able to make informed choices, or at least know what they are eating. Without knowledge of how food is produced and labelled, consumers have little or no chance of choosing food that is right for them.

Unfortunately, many parts of the food industry have failed to rise to the challenge of providing clear labelling. They use their resources and energy to promote the most attractive features of the food then hide the negative aspects on the less obvious parts of the package. Sadly, consumers often have neither the time nor the knowledge to unravel the real story behind the label. Trading standards services are responsible for making sure laws controlling food descriptions are followed by retailers and manufacturers. They advise the food industry on how to comply with the legislation and take formal action on the occasions when food providers overstep the mark. However, legal actions are long, complex and expensive, and success is not always guaranteed.

This book is of potential value to the consumer as it distils complicated information into easily digestible

chapters. Taking the reader through the common ingredients found in our foods, Richard Emerson also gives his views on how far we can trust the information displayed on labels and provides information to help consumers make informed decisions about the foods they buy.

Highlighting the difference, for example, between 'Use by' and 'Best Before', and what is meant by 'Farmhouse' or 'Home-made', *Read the Label!* provides advice that will give consumers an insight into what really goes into the food they buy and eat.

David Pickering
Joint Lead Food Officer for the Trading Standards
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INTRODUCTION

WHY READ THE LABEL?

Never before have we had such a wide choice of pre-packed food. Practically every product we buy today comes boxed, tinned or wrapped in plastic and covered with labels. And never before has so much information been printed on the label, which we're expected to digest along with the food. But just how far can you trust it?

Food makers are not allowed to lie but they don't always give the full facts either. There are ways of presenting label data to show a food product in a favourable light while ensuring more unpalatable morsels of information are tucked away where you are less likely to notice them. Food makers needn't have it all their own way, though.

It's time for shoppers to fight back and, armed with this book, you can. In these pages you'll find answers to much-asked questions. *Read the Label!* helps you make informed choices when you shop and it's pocket-sized so you can take it with you.

Labels carry so much information now that, despite all the packaging, food makers have a job fitting it all in. Even some fresh fruit and vegetables come pre-packed with their nutritional content itemised, along with region or country of origin and sometimes even the farmer's name. So, why bother to read the label?

Do we really need to know all this? Well, the plain answer is - yes. Just as we've never had so much information before, we've never before had such a vital

need for it. Perhaps the most important reason is that knowing what's on the label can be, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

The number of Britons suffering from food allergies is at an all-time high and, if existing trends are anything to judge by, this is going to increase. Food allergies are often embarrassing, sometimes distressing, always unpleasant and, potentially, fatal. As the list of allergy-triggering (allergenic) foods grows longer, and food processing gets ever more complex, so the risk of encountering a food you'll react to will also increase. To avoid allergens and other problem food ingredients you must read the label.

There's another life-or-death reason why you need to read the label. Diet-related diseases, including obesity and diabetes, are on the increase too. Some cancers are diet-linked, and heart disease is still a major problem. Heart attack rates are actually falling, mainly because fewer people smoke now. But that trend could be reversed as the obesity epidemic spreads and more people suffer from diabetes-linked heart disease.

Labels are packed with information to help you choose healthy foods. They can steer you away from the jagged rocks and swirling whirlpools of excess sugar, salt and fat towards the sun-kissed seas of life-enhancing nutrients. That doesn't mean eating a boring diet, but it does mean being selective. Reading the label helps you choose.

We all want quality products for the right price. Responsible food makers want to give us quality products, for the right profit. In getting the figures to balance, some companies cut corners, bulking up their products with water, gristle, blood, starchy filler, and so on. If you read the label you can spot the dodges.

It would be easy to think that all pre-packed, processed, ready-made food was 'bad for you' and that only food bought from the free-range organic farmers' market down the road was fit to eat. That is misleading. Most pre-packed

food is good quality, tasty and poses no threat to the majority of consumers. Even products that are high in salt, sugar and fat are fine for most people - in moderation.

Food makers may think we're too fussy, and that we should be happy so long as we get tasty, nutritious food at a fair price. But consumers *are* getting more fussy, especially over issues such as animal welfare, pesticides, additives, fat, sugar and salt. Consumer groups believe that many food-processing methods used today are the thin end of the wedge and that unless we act now, undesirable practices will become so firmly entrenched they'll be impossible to eradicate.

Food makers don't have *carte blanche* to print what they like. Labelling rules are tougher now so shoppers can be better informed. But there's a long way to go. As shoppers, we must play our part by reading the label and comparing brands - for quality and value, not just price - and use that information to make informed choices.

Labelling information must not give a false impression. If you think you've been misled you've a right to complain to the food maker or local trading standards department. Even if a prosecution seems unlikely, provided enough people complain, the company concerned may well bow to public pressure and revise the product.

Unless, as shoppers, we use our power collectively, we'll lose it to food makers and grocery chains who'll let the profit motive override our interests. Unless we exert our influence on politicians by voicing our concerns and backing those who support our ideals, they'll put the wishes of food makers and grocery chains before ours. The starting point for all this is to read the label and understand what it all means. So, do you want to read the label? Then read on...

1

HOW TO READ A FOOD LABEL

NOT ALL THE information on food labels is compulsory, and so food makers can decide for themselves just how much data they provide. Also, there is little standardisation in food labelling, which is why some food labels are gaudy and wordy while others are dull and uninformative. Some information must be provided by law, however, and the way this is displayed tends to follow a similar pattern.

This chapter will point out the main sections on a 'typical' food label. The product shown here doesn't actually exist (and would be pretty unpleasant if it did) but illustrates some of the features commonly found on food labels, plus a few tricks of the food labelling trade to watch out for. The other chapters deal with these points in more detail and suggest ways to use the information to make informed choices as you shop.

WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?



1. PROMOTIONAL CLAIMS

These are the advertising 'sells' that try to convince you of a food's high quality. They can suggest a long history of successful production ('traditional'), painstaking care ('home-made') or freshness ('natural goodness'). In most cases these terms have no legal meaning so eye them with suspicion ([see here](#)).

2. BRAND NAME AND/OR DESCRIPTION

This helps you tell one brand from another. In most cases it will identify the nature of the product. *Legally*, though, it doesn't have to. It could be a 'customary' or 'traditional' name, such as 'pizza', or a fancy marketing name, such as

‘Acto-Yog’. If the nature of the product is unclear, an accurate name or description (known as its ‘legal’ name) must, by law, be printed on the label *somewhere* - but it could be in tiny letters and you may have to hunt for it ([see here](#)).

3. ILLUSTRATIONS

Any photographs or designs on the label must not give a misleading impression. For example, a picture of hens living a carefree life in a sunlit meadow would be misleading on a box of eggs from caged birds. Similarly, any ingredients shown should be in the product - unless, of course, it’s just a ‘serving suggestion’ ([see here](#)).

4. HEALTH CLAIMS

These are the advertising ‘sells’ that try to convince you that a product is good for you. They may suggest added goodness (‘omega-3’, ‘high fibre’) or a reduction in unhealthy ingredients (‘low fat’). Food makers can run into trouble if they tell ‘porkies’ - but it doesn’t mean they won’t try to stretch the facts ([see here](#)).

5. STORAGE AND/OR COOKING INFORMATION

You’ll find this information on food products that require special instructions, usually because quality or safety might otherwise be jeopardised. A ready meal may need to be cooked in a microwave rather than an oven, for example, or a food might need storing in a fridge once opened to prevent spoilage ([see here](#)).

6. ESTIMATED CONTENTS

The label should state how much food there actually is inside all the packaging. If the quantity is followed by an ‘e’, this means it is an estimate but the figure should be

close, otherwise you can complain to your local trading standards department ([see here](#)).

7. CERTIFIED ENDORSEMENTS

There may be a special logo or certification mark that endorses the food as having been produced according to strict rules laid down by a recognised organisation. The logo might suggest, for example, that a product is suitable for vegetarians ('V') or contains organic ingredients. Food makers must be able to justify claims like this, so if you're unconvinced ask them to prove it ([see here](#)).

8. ORIGIN MARK

This mark is for safety reasons. If a product is contaminated - with glass or bacteria, for example - the authorities use this mark to trace the food and remove it from sale. The top line is the country of origin ('UK' or 'FR', for example). The middle line is a code identifying the last company in the chain of production. The bottom line indicates that the product meets EC rules. If the origin mark is missing it will have been on an outer wrapper that was removed by the shop before the product went on sale.

9. PRODUCER'S NAME AND ADDRESS

This gives the contact details of the manufacturer, producer or retail outlet. It will provide the registered company name and address and may give a phone number for customers to use. If you have a complaint about a product you should first go to the shop where you bought it. But if you're still unhappy, or have a query the shop can't answer, use these details to contact the company concerned.

10. DATE MARK

The date mark tells you how long a product should last. 'Use by' dates are for foods that go bad quickly – often within days. 'Best before' dates are for products lasting weeks, months or years. Ignore these dates at your peril! ([See here.](#))

GRAPE AND CUSTARD FLAVOUR DESSERT		
INGREDIENTS; Corn flour, milk (10%), corn syrup, salt, inulin, flavouring (grape, custard), colouring (E110), preservative (E210), stabiliser (E414). 11		
WARNING! Contains milk. May contain egg, fish, peanut, soya, grape, custard. 12		
NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION (AVERAGE VALUES)		
	PER 100g	PER 50g SERVING
ENERGY	361 Cals	180 Cals
PROTEIN	12 g	6 g
CARBOHYDRATE	58 g	29 g
(of which sugars)	20 g	10 g
FAT	9 g	4.5 G
(of which saturates)	1.2 g	0.6 g
FIBRE	Trace	Trace
SODIUM	0.2 g	0.1 g
Salt Equivalent	0.5 g	0.25 g
GUIDELINE DAILY AMOUNTS		
	Women	Men
Calories	2000	2500
Fat (g)	70	95
Saturated fat (g)	20	30
<i>Official Government figures for average adults</i>		

11. INGREDIENTS

The ingredients list tells you what is actually in the product. It alerts you to healthy and also not-so-healthy contents. If a member of your family must avoid a food ingredient – perhaps because of a dietary disorder such as a food allergy, or a lifestyle decision such as vegetarianism

- this is the place to check whether a food is suitable. Food makers may change ingredients from time to time, so regularly recheck the ingredients of brands you buy often, just to be sure ([see here](#)).

12. WARNING BOX

Some products have a special section that alerts you to any problem ingredients likely to trigger an allergy or food intolerance reaction. This isn't compulsory so don't rely on it ([see here](#)).

13. NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION

If you're concerned about your family's diet, the nutritional information panel is vital. It lists Calorie content and levels of fat, protein and carbohydrate. Use this information to choose healthier brands or plan a healthy diet for the family. This panel must be shown if a food maker has made a health claim for the product, such as 'low fat' ([see here](#)).

14. DIETARY GUIDELINE INFORMATION

Many labels now give dietary guidelines to help you plan a healthy diet. Two systems are currently in use: 'Guideline Daily Amounts' (GDAs) and 'traffic lights' ([see here](#)).

USING LABEL INFORMATION

Later chapters suggest practical ways to apply the label information when buying foods for the family, choosing quality products and selecting 'safe' ingredients for those with particular dietary needs, such as gluten intolerance, food allergies or diabetes.

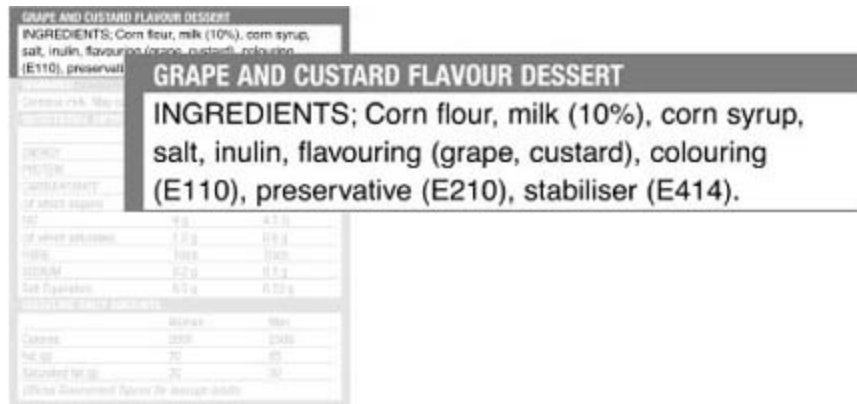
CHECKOUT...

Just as every shopping trip ends at the checkout, so each chapter in this book ends with a list of points to *check out* as you study the label. Before you buy, read the label and check:

- * name or description, so you know what you're buying - it may be hidden
- * date mark and storage/cooking details, so you know it's safe to eat
- * ingredients and warning box, so you know it's good value and suitable for the family
- * nutritional information and dietary guidelines, so you know it's a healthy product that fits in with the family's dietary needs
- * promotional claims and endorsements, and decide whether you can trust them.

2

WHAT GOES INTO YOUR FOOD?



THE 'INGREDIENTS' LIST (or 'contents') is the most important part of the label. With a few exceptions, it must list all the food items and chemical additives a food product contains. In a nutshell, it tells you what you are actually buying. No matter what the product is called, or what else may be printed on the packaging, this section must be accurate. It tells you whether the product contains:

- * quality ingredients you want - and in what proportion
- * unhealthy or problem ingredients you're trying to avoid ([see here](#)).

KEY INGREDIENTS

Ingredients are listed in order of weight or volume - largest first, smallest last. For the most important or 'key' ingredients, the list gives a percentage, such as 'apple

(60%)'. Key ingredients are the ones that distinguish one food from another. Without them, a food product would be entirely different. For example, you couldn't have an apple pie without apple. This percentage is the 'quantitative ingredient declaration' (or 'QUID', as it's known in the trade). It shows the key ingredients as a percentage of the whole product. Key ingredients are those that are:

- * an essential part of the product, or
- * referred to in the name of the product, or
- * highlighted on the label in words or pictures.

In a shepherd's pie, for example, minced lamb and mashed potato are key ingredients and so both percentages will be given. You might see them listed as 'lamb (40%), potato (30%)'. (Yoghurt is an exception. Although usually made from milk, you won't see 'milk' listed in the ingredients. But such exceptions are rare.)

This percentage is a useful aid to shoppers. It helps you check whether a product is good value for money (for example, because it contains lots of quality ingredients) or poor value (because it is bulked out with cheap ingredients). It allows you to compare products and discover whether, for instance, one brand of fish fingers is cheaper than another simply because it contains less fish. If you make a note of the percentage of key ingredients in the products you buy regularly, you'll know if food makers are starting to cut corners.

CREAM? THAT'S CRACKERS!

Cream crackers are so called because they once contained 'cream of tartar'. This is no longer the case so, although the word 'cream' is in the title, you

won't find any 'cream' in the ingredients. However, as the name is so well-established it is allowed to stay.

If one of the ingredients is a 'compound food' - that is, a mixture of ingredients, such as 'sauce', which could be sold as a food in its own right - the percentage of the key ingredient in the mixture will be listed. So, for example, 'fish in cheese sauce' would show the percentage of fish the product contains *and* the cheese in the cheese sauce. If an ingredient is not essential, and wouldn't be a factor in your deciding whether or not to buy the product, the percentage of that ingredient needn't be given.

Where a product has a traditional or customary name, and not a literal one, the key ingredients are those normally associated with the food. Traditionally, a 'cottage pie' contains beef (not a cottage) and so the label will give the percentage of beef present. If a cottage pie contains lamb it has been mislabelled - that's a shepherd's pie.

Food makers usually work out the percentage based on the weight of all ingredients *before* cooking. However, products such as biscuits, cakes and cooked or cured meats lose water during cooking. In such cases the percentage is based on the weight of the product *as sold*. For example, there might be 50g of butter in 200g of uncooked biscuit mixture. That makes butter 25 per cent of the total mix. But 50g of water might be lost in the baking, so the percentage actually shown on the label would be higher - 33 per cent.

READ THE SMALL PRINT!

Food makers can legally show unappetising information in tiny type. Why not take a small magnifier with you when you shop?

Meat products sold loose at the baker's, butcher's or supermarket meat and delicatessen counters also need to show the percentage of meat they contain, either on the wrapper or a label nearby, but not their other ingredients. Such products include freshly baked sausage rolls, meat pies and Cornish pasties. This doesn't apply to freshly made meat-filled sandwiches and rolls, meat-based soups, meat salads and all non-meat foods freshly made on the premises. But all products - meat and non-meat - including salads, sandwiches and soups that are prepared elsewhere and sold pre-packed on the premises must display a full list of ingredients on the label.

COMPOSITE INGREDIENTS

So far so good, but the ingredients list can get complicated if a product contains a lot of composite (or mixed) ingredients. This is because each mixture must also list its ingredients, in brackets afterwards, in descending order of weight/volume. For example:

Fish, sauce (*tomato purée, cheese, vegetable extracts, maize starch, Cheddar cheese powder, olive oil*), yeast.

Lists with a lot of composite ingredients soon get unwieldy and confusing, especially if one of the ingredients in a mixture is also a mixture. You then have brackets within brackets, making it difficult to work out where one mixture ends and another begins. For example:

Fish, sauce (tomato purée, vegetable extracts (*tomato, onion, leek, paprika*), maize starch, Cheddar cheese powder, olive oil), yeast.
