

Jerusha Klemperer:

I want to tell you about Whetstone Radio Collective, a brand new podcast venture from Whetstone Media. The shows from Whetstone Radio have a sound all their own, with discussions on politics, culture, global gastronomic histories, all centered on human empathy. Whetstone Radio Collective has some incredible shows for you, like Climate Cuisine from Taiwanese-American journalist Clarissa Wei, which looks at the way the climate crisis is fundamentally shaping our relationship with food, or Fruit Love Letters from chef Jessamine Starr, which is like a valentine to all your favorite fruits. I encourage you to check out some of the programming at Whetstone Radio Collective and continue to discover the immense power that food has on our communal lives.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Have you ever seen the word natural on a pack of hot dogs and wondered what it means? You're not the only one. The words natural or all natural on food packaging have been vexing customers and regulators for years. After first trying and failing to clarify the label back in the '90s, the FDA decided in 2016 that it better get a handle on things. It started by having an open comment period during which consumers could weigh in online, sharing what they thought the word natural should mean if used on a food label.

Jerusha Klemperer:

On today's episode, we are checking in on that process and looking at those words, claims, seals, and certifications that show up on your food packaging. What do they tell us, and is what they tell us real? Can we trust it? Who are those labels for, for companies or consumers? In particular, we were curious about the labels that seem to say a lot but don't actually have much rigor. We talk to a few experts, check out some food labels ourselves, and try to sniff out the good labels from the bad.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of FoodPrint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices, as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Doctor Marion Nestle:

The purpose of a food company is to sell food products. That's what it's about. It's got stockholders to please. It wants to sell as much of the product as it possibly can at as high price as it can get away with. That's its goal, its business objective. That takes precedence over everything else. I'm Marion Nestle. I'm the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University. When Congress was considering the nutrition facts label between 1990 and 1993, when it actually went into effect, the food industry didn't want it. They were not at all interested in having calories, saturated fat, sugar, and salt on their label. So they negotiated with Congress and said, "We'll accept it if you allow us to have health claims on food packages."

Doctor Marion Nestle:

Previously, the FDA had not allowed any kind of this product will cure mitigate, treat a disease. You just couldn't do that. Congress, in passing this law, said that there were certain health claims that were

mandated in the law, and set up what the criteria were for subsequent health claims. Now, if you go on the FDA's website and on their health claims pages, you'll see health claims for preventing disease. Those need one category of evidence. You'll see qualified health claims, which I think are the funniest things I've ever heard, which are health claims that are allowed, but you have to have a disclaimer with them that says that they're not approved by the FDA.

Doctor Marion Nestle:

When the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act was passed in 1994, the FDA was then forced to allow what are called structure function claims on food packages, which are claims that an ingredient in the food promotes the health of or supports the structure of some component of the body. Well, no rational person can tell the difference between those. What's the difference between supports a healthy heart and helps prevent heart disease? The public is confused.

Doctor Marion Nestle:

I mean, I remember going back to the era of the time that Congress passed the law. Everybody I knew was eating oat bran. They were putting oat bran on everything because some studies had come out that oat bran reduced blood cholesterol levels, so there was an oat bran craze. Oat bran was put into everything. Everybody was eating it. The idea that it was going to solve your heart disease problems, which, if you gave one minute of thought to it, would be wishful thinking. Really, one food is never going to do that. But it sells food products. Once you understand that the purpose of a food company is to sell food products, then you look at the whole labeling issue in a very different way.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

When you go to a supermarket, you see so many claims and symbols on packages. It's really a cacophony. Some are marketing claims. Some are just pictures that maybe invoke or provoke a certain feeling that you might have toward the product. Some are just outright claims about the product. I'm Urvashi Rangan. I'm the chief scientist for FoodPrint. I have spent the last two decades looking at the food production system, a lot of that looking at labels specifically in food, what they mean, what they don't mean, and why and how we can get better labels in the food system. All of these are generally used as marketing claims to get people interested in products. There are some labels that are about problematic things or dating labels, but for most labels in the marketplace, it's about marketing.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

More recently in the last, I'd say couple of decades, we've seen a proliferation of what we call certified labels in the marketplace. Certified labels generally have an organization behind them. They have a set of standards behind them, and then any company that chooses to seek out that certification must apply for it. They must be approved by the certification body in order to use the label. They simply can't use it by themselves or of their own accord. In that way, those are some of the best labeling schemes out there because you have an independent body performing the certification that isn't necessarily vested in the products that are being certified. That assures consumers that there's some level of independence. It isn't how all labels are necessarily done.

Jerusha Klempner:

I asked Urvashi for examples of labels that you can trust actually mean something.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

Probably the most common popular certified label that people see out there is the organic label. The organic label has been around for many, many years, actually, since probably the early '70s is when the first organic certifier was in business. So the claim of organic's been used for a long time. Many, many certifiers came into the space with slightly different standards. That was in play for probably about 20 years. In 1990, the government actually decided to harmonize those standards under one standard that then certifiers could get accreditation by the government in order to certify companies to those standards. That's what happened in the Organic Food Production Act of 1990. It took 10 or 12 years to promulgate that standard. So today, we do have a standard. It isn't perfect. It isn't everything we might want it to be in terms of sustainability. But it is a certified label, and it does have accountability built into it.

Errol Schweizer:

Out of all the food labels that you see in the marketplace, it's probably the best, for the main reason that you are able to avoid hundreds of agrochemicals and processing agents and other weird stuff that maybe you don't want to eat as much of. My name is Errol Schweizer. I've been in the food industry for the better part of 27 years, food service and retail, farmers markets, warehousing logistics, stocking shelves, ordering groceries. I was with Whole Foods Market for 14 years, including seven years as their National Vice President of the Grocery Department, which was their largest department in the store, about 30% of the company's business. In that role, I helped launch thousands of products into national brands. I helped develop supply chains for organic, non-GMO, grass fed, plant-based, et cetera.

Errol Schweizer:

The organic label, it's far from perfect. I've also been a huge critic of it. I've been a critic internally with Whole Foods, with my friends in the organic community. But organic, when it's done right, when it's done in soil, usually means you're producing a healthier product. There's actually research showing that. It usually means it's protecting the environment. There's research showing that.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

Even amongst the certified labels, there is a range from sort of good to really, really good. They don't always all come with the same level of caliber or meaning, but they at least have some level of authenticity, some level of accountability built in.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Then there are words on the package that aren't certified labels. They're more like claims.

Patty Lovera:

Healthy is a really good example of how quickly it can get complicated.

Jerusha Klemperer:

This is Patty Lovera, an expert on food policy and food systems issues.

Patty Lovera:

Yeah. It seems obvious. Stuff's healthy, or it's not healthy. Draw a line. You're on one side of the line or not. Think about how many people fight about their diet right now, what the right diet is. It's actually politically loaded to define what healthy is. There have been some fights. Again, I'm not going to get the

year right. But FDA took a shot at it at one point. No one's making you put a healthy label on a package. But some people tried. Then they said you're on the wrong side of it. It was a company that, that was their whole brand. It was very, very health forward. I think it was nuts that were causing their problem. They had used a lot of nuts. That put them on the wrong side of the line in terms of fat content.

Jerusha Klempere:

In 2015, the FDA accused KIND Bars of misusing the label healthy because their product was too high in fat. KIND fought back, arguing that the FDA guidelines were based on outdated notions of fat, that nutrition science now recognizes that nuts are a healthy fat and part of a healthy diet.

Patty Lovera:

Then, the next thing you know, it's this brouhaha for three years. Part of me is like, "Maybe you shouldn't be allowed to make that claim." Maybe it's just too hard. Maybe you give people accurate information about salt and fat and protein, what we need to know about the food, and people will figure out what is healthy for them. It's a really good example of how complicated it can get and how quickly it can get complicated.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

A great example of a label, and a popular one that has no standards whatsoever, is the natural label. Natural can pretty much be used on any product. It doesn't really have to mean all that much. In the case of meat, if you see it on meat, it means nothing was added to the cut of meat itself. It has nothing to do with how the animal was raised. Did it have a natural diet? Did it live in a natural environment? It doesn't have to do with that. With non-meat products, we've seen the natural label pretty much on a whole range of things, where really, it can range from having some meaning to no meaning. Plant-based is another term out there that we see a lot of these days. In fact, I think the natural label has turned into plant-based in a lot of cases. Again, another claim that has absolutely no set of standards behind it.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

What's unfortunate about both of those claims is that they do have literal meaning. Natural is a word, and it has meaning. It should mean it came from nature or has some basis in nature. Yet you can take something from nature and really process the crap out of it and still call it a natural product. That's where things get to be particularly misleading. Is an apple natural? Yeah. Is apple juice natural? Well, you pressed it from the apples, so we can get to natural. When you concentrate that juice down and freeze it and then reconstitute it, is that natural? Well, you start to pull away a little bit from what that meaning is. I guess, technically yes, though. You could still label it natural.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

But then you start to think about those ingredients used in processed food products. Those products then don't necessarily become natural just because you combined a lot of processed ingredients that came from a natural source at one point in time. These are the lines of thinking about, well, how natural is that? Obviously, if you buy a fruit or a vegetable, it's a natural product. If you buy milk, it's a natural product. But really, it's become how people use these terms and really stretch the truth to really render something that is claiming something that it isn't.

Errol Schweizer:

Yeah. I don't think natural is a great word to be used. I think there's a legacy usage of natural in terms of the natural food industry and natural food stores and Whole Foods. I used to consider Whole Foods the popular front of the natural food industry. It was going mainstream and large scale. But in terms of a descriptor, I think natural is really misleading, doesn't make much sense, very vague. I honestly think that we need to stop using that word natural because what it does is it competes with organic, and it clouds a lot of the poor practices that manufacturers get away with by just slapping a natural label on it. And the fact that, look, agriculture is the result of human interaction with nature, or with the environment, let's say. Let's not even use the word nature. Let's not confuse things. The whole notion of natural is really fraught because we've always been influencing the environment. We've always been influencing, as people, how crops are grown.

Doctor Marion Nestle:

Yeah. When you see the word natural on a food product, that should trigger your understanding that marketing is at work. The term natural sells food. People love it. They want to buy foods that are natural. The definition of natural is so vague that there's been a push on the FDA to try to clean it up for a really long time. But companies love to use it because it sells. When I see natural, I think marketing.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Now, are there any parameters on it right now-

Doctor Marion Nestle:

Yes.

Jerusha Klemperer:

... per the FDA? There are?

Doctor Marion Nestle:

Yeah. Yeah. There are parameters. You are not allowed to have artificial ingredients added. If it's got artificial flavors and colors, no. If it's got natural flavors and colors, however those are made, you can put it in there. The companies are very, very good about gaming these rules and getting around them.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

The trouble in the marketplace is that there aren't a lot of regulations around marketing claims and what it is you can and can't say. It's a great example of where if you just leave it to the market to decide, you actually end up with a lot of confusion and murkiness because different companies will attempt to market in different ways. That's a problem because it means consumers feel cheated before there's any accountability put into place, before there's any followup. That makes it tough because then the onus is on us to figure out whether something means something or not, not on the companies themselves.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can you tell us? Is anyone moderating or legislating how it's used? Is there anything stopping anyone from just putting that on whatever label they want?

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

Depending on the product, if it's a meat product, the US Department of Agriculture would regulate that meaning of natural. The USDA does have some minimal terms around using the term natural on a meat product, which means you just can't add anything artificial to the cut of meat itself. It doesn't have really anything to do with how that animal was raised or what it ate. So it has some meaning, but it's almost, in many ways, more problematic because it seems like there's some regulation around it. It seems like there's some accountability behind it. But really, if you were to, say, hold the USDA accountable for a misleading natural term on, say, a heavily industrial produced animal product, you would have no case. So these labels are only as meaningful as the standards behind them.

Patty Lovera:

There's labels that are required by the law. There's labels that aren't required but are regulated, and everything in between. It's shockingly messy and shockingly confusing. It puts way too much burden on individual shoppers to try to figure it out.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What about the FDA and their open comment period on defining natural back in 2016? Over 7,500 comments were submitted. But it's hard to tell from the FDA's website if anything has happened since then.

Doctor Marion Nestle:

No. Nothing's happened. Not that I'm aware of. I mean, in part, we don't have a director for the FDA, for reasons that I don't really understand and don't know anything about. Biden has not appointed a director for the FDA although I heard rumors that he was about to. It's a leaderless agency at a time when the FDA is being called upon to deal with a lot of issues. They've been very slow in approving the vaccines for COVID, I think much slower than anybody wishes they were. That's been a problem. On the other hand, they approved an Alzheimer's drug over the recommendations of their advisory committee. Quite unusual for them not to pay attention to their advisory committee. It's hard to know what's going on at the FDA. They're an under-resourced agency, and they've been in trouble for a very long time.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

To my knowledge, nothing's really come of that. I think that companies got a little scared from it and from the ruckus of it, and started shifting to terms like simple or simply or plant-based. I think we have seen a shift from natural to other murky terms. I think we have seen that shift happen. The Food and Drug Administration opened that petition in response to a request for petition making from all of these groups. It was really to say, "You groups are asking for us to open a comment period to hear about whether we need to change our rule making on the natural label." Shouldn't have been news to them because so much has gone on over the years.

Patty Lovera:

In the meantime, and this happens in many issues, when we have ... I think it's a void, right? I think we've created a void in the marketplace. This lack of regulation has created this space where companies can make claims that don't really serve consumers. Well, there's been I don't even know how many lawsuits where folks have taken the issue to court. The way that you do that, typically, is you make a very specific claim against a very specific product. Groups of people or individuals are filing a claim against one company and saying, "The thing you say on this product is not true." People got riled up about it all. Lawyers are just trying to cash in. There's a lot of hand-wringing about we're abusing the

court system. It should be harder to sue. One argument you hear from folks who think about it in a holistic way is, well, that's happening because the rest of the government is dropping the ball.

Jerusha Klemperer:

All right. We're here today to check out some products that we all found, that are [inaudible 00:21:39] ...

Jerusha Klemperer:

Our FoodPrint team headed to the supermarket and to our own kitchens, to see what we could find with a natural label on it. We hit a whole range of stores, from a corner store to a neighborhood grocery, to Trader Joe's, to Whole Foods. I know we've already touched base a little bit about the fact that it wasn't quite the landscape out there that we were expecting when we hit the supermarket.

Ryan Nebeker:

I've got this all natural cranberry health mix, which is just trail mix that has cranberries, golden raisins, raw almonds, pepitas, walnuts, and sunflower oil. This unsweetened apple sauce, which I took a picture of it in the store because the other unsweetened apple sauce was organic. Those are your two options. I think that says something about the people who are looking for unseasoned applesauce. They're looking for an unprocessed, pure product. So this, which is ... Where's the ingredients? Just apples. This is literally just apples without any preservatives.

Katherine Sacks:

I found all natural duck rillettes. No added hormones or antibiotics. I guess that's talking about what they fed the duck. There was also this marinated string cheese. It's a string cheese knot with lots of herbs and stuff. And then, in just small letters on the side, it says, "rBST-Free. All natural."

Jerusha Klemperer:

Well, I think the reason that we're seeing most of the products that I found that had the natural label were dairy or meat, it's because of the actual guidelines for natural on those, which I know are different from processed products or vegetable products things like that.

Katherine Sacks:

Right. But then I have my natural pickles.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Right.

Katherine Sacks:

Which, I mean, it's cucumber, water, salt, garlic, spices, dried red chile.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. It's such an interesting thing because you're like, "Yeah, that does sound natural. It's a pickle with some vinegar and some salt." But it's that interesting calculation of putting that label on there, I think to give it a little bit of a sheen of something more than that.

Katherine Sacks:

There's so many things that are naturally delicious or naturally flavored. This snack called Chomperz, which are these crispy snacks, I've never had them. But that package has naturally delicious, and it's not organic. So it makes me think, "Are you trying to pull one over on customers?" I feel like-

Jerusha Klemperer:

The naturally thing, that's very interesting. Is that a workaround? If I say, "Naturally delicious," then it's like I've gotten the word natural on there, but I haven't called it natural. I wonder if it's not beholden to the same.

Katherine Sacks:

Yeah. I feel like there's a lot of stuff that I saw that was naturally delicious or naturally flavored.

Ryan Nebeker:

The naturally delicious versus natural ... Naturally flavored is a very tightly regulated claim. Naturally delicious is just a slogan. You could have a totally synthetic product back in the trans fat days, and you could call it naturally delicious, and you could probably get away with that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Did you guys have any high-level aha breakthroughs?

Katherine Sacks:

Yeah. I think I was a little bit surprised at the lack of helpful information.

Ryan Nebeker:

Generally, I guess I feel like with the trendiness of clean label marketing, it seems like a lot of the claims on food labels have actually gotten more specific. They will tell you grass fed or organic or non-GMO. When I was looking at the Ezekiel Bread, I think it harkens back to this time when everything was really poorly disambiguated. A whole grain product was natural-ish. Now natural is no longer an effective way to distinguish yourself on a grocery store shelf. So you're going to turn to more specific things, because the thing about food levels is, crowded and chaotic as they might seem, it's extremely valuable real estate. There are still regulations in what you can say. So you're probably not going to waste that space on something that doesn't actually communicate something more specific.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Anecdotally, at least, it seemed to us that the natural label is on its way out.

Errol Schweizer:

I've actually written about this and said before, there really isn't any natural food industry anymore. It's really just the food industry because so much of what we've done and worked for in the last 20-30 years is mainstream. I mean, Walmart's the largest retailer of organic. Maybe Costco. It's one of those two. They do more than Whole Foods. You could find organic products in ... The last number I saw was 90-plus percent of households. I mean, this is mainstream. It's just the food industry.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I guess I'm wondering if you have a take, either you know or you have a hunch. The reason that natural has disappeared off of labels, is it because of the lawsuits that are out there around labels? Is it because-

Errol Schweizer:

Oh, natural is a hot potato. Natural is such a hot potato.

Jerusha Klemperer:

No one wants to deal with it anymore. Is that the deal?

Errol Schweizer:

Nobody wants to deal with lawsuits because the natural lawsuit stuff happened over the last decade. Even when I was at Whole Foods, and I left Whole Foods six years ago, our quality assurance team, our food safety team, and our legal team, I just can remember the two of them coming into my office at once talking about some product with an unverified natural claim, and some ambulance chaser threatening to sue us for carrying it. I'd always be like, "One, I didn't put that on the shelf. I don't know why we're selling that." If it was one of the suppliers I'd negotiated with, I'd tell them not to use that word. It became its own little cottage industry of these lawyers with these consumer groups suing these companies that were using natural because they were misleading the consumers about the ingredients or processes. Yeah. It's a total hot potato.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That speaks to the fact that this marketplace is out of control. Regulators don't have a handle on it, so people are going to court instead.

Errol Schweizer:

The FDA, the regulators like the USDA, seem to take a minimalist perspective, and usually one that benefits or keeps big business very comfortable. I don't think you can really rely on the ambulance chasers to keep things honest. I think we need to have more public participation in the food system. We need to have more small D democracy in the food system. We need to think about food sovereignty and local and direct control of food systems, as opposed to offloading it to lawyers or large retailers or publicly traded food manufacturers.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Part of why these lawsuits are happening and are important is because false advertising, using labels that don't tell the truth about the products they're on, hurts consumers. I wanted to learn more about how they hurt people and who they hurt the most. So I reached out to HEAL Food Alliance.

Kristen Strader:

I'm Kristen Strader, the campaigns manager at HEAL Food Alliance, where I organize strategies to break up corporate power and move it into the hands of communities. HEAL stands for health, environment, agriculture, and labor. We are a multiracial coalition led by our member organizations who represent over two million rural and urban farmers, fishers, farm and food chain workers, Indigenous groups, scientists, policy experts, and community organizers. We work together to grow our collective power, to transform our food and farm systems. At the heart of our alliance is the acknowledgement that no single

person or organization can transform the interwoven systems of colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and cis-hetero patriarchy alone, or in isolation.

Jerusha Klemperer:

HEAL has a multi-planked policy platform that they use to guide their work. Some of the platforms are resilient regional economies, dignity for food workers and phase out factory farming. One of them is increased food literacy and transparency.

Kristen Strader:

Part of the reason that our platform is so expansive is because the food system is gigantic and has a huge history of exploitation of labor, stolen labor, stolen land, genocide. That's a deep history. We acknowledge that it's not just one thing that we have to do. It's a transformation of the entire system. The food literacy and food transparency plank, through that, we feel that all of us, no matter who we are or where we come from, deserve the freedom to choose what we put into our bodies. But currently, that's not the case. A handful of corporations control our entire food supply from seed to table. They make it impossible for us to know what we're eating or to have a choice at all.

Jerusha Klemperer:

That lack of transparency, it's not just I can't tell when I look at a label what's in there. That's at every step of the chain. We are in the dark.

Kristen Strader:

Yeah. A lot of the time, there are actually misleading or straight up deceitful labels on products. Part of the problem is that there's also not a transparency into campaign donations and political influence, which is something that we are also calling for in this plank. There are several agencies that most likely get regularly lobbied by these food companies. Congress as well gets influenced by companies in their favor. There's a long history of that. If we look back into the '80s and what happened with the Federal Trade Commission, there was an effort at the time for that agency to hold junk food companies accountable for misleading and aggressive advertising, especially targeting children. But once the agency was ready to do something about it, lobbyists from junk food companies came for Congress. Since Congress funds the Federal Trade Commission, they threatened to shut the agency down. That created inaction at the agency. That's something that has deeply affected transparency and labeling and these companies' ability to just regularly market lies to our communities.

Jerusha Klemperer:

One thing that I really love about HEAL's platform and the various points is that with each one, you have very specific suggestions for action. It's not just an identification of the problems, but also of the potential solutions. When it comes to food literacy and transparency, what are the changes that could be made on this front?

Kristen Strader:

First and foremost, we really want to urge government to put forward antitrust laws that prevent these powerful corporations from making the rules that continue an investment in our current food system of harm. That feels the most significant thing we can do because it would have an effect on everything else that those companies are able to market to us and the information that they share with us. We also

need transparency about the politics behind the food economy, including corporate donations to elected officials. We also need visible warning labels for harmful food and beverage products. I think, if these companies are being honest, their labels would say something like, "Fuels exploitation," or "Investment in the prison system." But that is not what we're getting.

Patty Lovera:

I think that the standard should be, if it's not going to give people information that they expect, then maybe we shouldn't use that claim. That is a hard sell in our current political system where we think corporations are people. We think they have First Amendment rights, too. I mean, that's some of what we run on into when you talk about labeling. You're talking about a company's speech. The reverse of this is stuff we want to know. Companies should tell us if there's GMOs in it. They should tell us what country it comes from, country of origin labeling. We have run into arguments for years from companies saying, "You can't make me talk. You can't compel my speech to put that on the label."

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

When it comes to food, greenwashing is a term that's used to describe labels out there that claim to be more environmentally friendly, or more sustainable, or more green, or maybe more climate friendly in some way, shape, or form, but don't deliver on that promise at all. In fact, maybe are misleading you in many ways. There's a bright side and a dark side of this. The dark side is that it creates an incredibly confusing marketplace and makes it very difficult for people who want to shop with green values, who care about the climate and the environment or animal health, to be able to make authentic choices. That is the downside of that.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

The bright side of that is that it reflects a company's awareness that consumers are interested in that attribute. The bright side is that the companies know that's where consumers are going. That's what consumers want. It's an attempt to capitalize on something good. So to the degree we can line up consumer expectations, then, with the claims that are being made out there, maybe there's some hope that we can actually turn this tide, because clearly there's a demand. The question is, are companies required to meet that demand in a truthful way? Or are they just going to be allowed to run roughshod over consumers and really cheat them of what they're willing to pay for or pay more for?

Patty Lovera:

You shouldn't have to have a law degree or a public policy degree to figure out, well, on this food, it's the USDA. Their standards are a little more meaningful. At least, they have inspectors in the plant. If I see natural on meat and poultry, I still don't think it's really rigorous, but it means a little bit more because they approve the label that you're going to use on that type of chicken. On cereal, it's the Food and Drug Administration. They don't do anything. I really hate that. But then what about colors? This is insanity that we put this on individual people to sort out because the government doesn't have the backbone to stand up to these companies and draw a line and say, "This is what this word means. This is what it doesn't."

Patty Lovera:

This is true. We're not even getting into GMO labels. I mean, there's lots and lots and lots of issues that we are asking people to work out in the grocery aisle, which is bonkers. One, take a deep breath because this shouldn't all be on you. Here's some tips to get you the best outcome in the situation

you're in. Just rules of thumb, the closer you can get to the source, the less dependent you are on a label. At the farmers market, there are people that are mad at me about this. I'm not going to sweat it if you're certified organic at the farmer's market. If I can ask you a question about what you do when you look me in the eye and you're like, "I don't use sewage sludge. I don't use GMO seeds." In the Safeway or the grocery store, I can't ask that question of the producer, so I am going to be dependent on labels. I would like those labels to be accurate. Anytime you can get direct farmers market, direct sales, CSA, whatever it is, you can ask those questions.

Patty Lovera:

The other advice I give people is most of us buy a pretty standard shopping list most of the time. We know what our go-to greatest hits are on the grocery list. So do your homework at home on the computer. If you're not on the computer, you can call the 800 numbers and try to answer those questions then, and make your list. When I buy eggs, I've done my homework. This is my top choice. If they're not available, this is my number two. And then move on to the next food. This is also why we need to turn ourselves into whatever you want to call it, food citizens. We also need to engage at that government level because it's ridiculous that we should have to help people cope with the stress of understanding how to avoid the stuff they don't like in the food system. At some point, we need to make this connection of I shouldn't have to shop my way around farm workers being exposed to hazardous chemicals. It should be illegal to expose them to hazardous chemicals. That shouldn't be on me as a shopper to figure out.

Doctor Urvashi Rangan:

Labels are not always in service to the consumer, but what we can do as consumers is at least try to shop with better levels of scrutiny and not simply take things at face value. By doing a little homework, you can in fact find labels, claims, even companies that may be coming much closer to meeting your expectations for what you are willing to pay more for and want to get as a result of doing that.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Where's a shopper supposed to do that homework? What are the things you should be paying attention to? This might depend on what you care most about. If you're interested in the natural label or what you thought it meant, things like fewer chemicals or no pesticides, you might try the certified organic label. In general, all of these experts pointed to certified labels as better bets. You can find most certified labels on FoodPrint, in our food label guide. Some people find it easiest to pick one product to learn a bit about, like eggs or milk, for example, and then figure out what aspect of its production matters the most to you. Is it pesticides, animal welfare, worker welfare? Then figure out what label you want to look for based on those concerns.

Errol Schweizer:

I think the first thing I would say about people who ... When you're looking at labels, it sucks that you have to spend so much time and effort and really money on trying to understand what's in your food. That's because the food system is upside down and backwards. There really shouldn't be labels that are market-driven attributes to convince you to spend more money on better food. What we really should be doing is putting a warning label on all the stuff that's poison, or labeling, "Hey, this is from a concentrated animal feedlot. This animal's piglets were ripped away from it when it was a nursing sow and killed in a manner that you would not consider humane. These products were grown with the use of Roundup, which may cause cancer."

Errol Schweizer:

You look at the concentration of ownership in the food system, in meatpacking, poultry, beef, pork. We look at the concentration of ownership in different categories, whether it's beverages or cereals or frozen entrees. We look at the racialized concentration of ownership among retailers and big food companies. Highly geared towards mostly white, mostly men. That's really the truth of the food system, not the fact that we're charging a little more for organic. Really, if we took a true cost accounting approach to the food system, if we actually took into account all the runoff, all the soil loss, all the exploitation of labor, if we took into account all those costs of the food system and put them on the label, one, the pricing would be different, but two, we'd probably want to rethink the way we actually do food.

Errol Schweizer:

We need to figure out how to take away the power and wealth from those folks who are benefiting from that. If you can afford to buy organic, support institutional purchasing programs like Center for Good Food Purchasing. Support the notion of food as a human right. Work with local organic farms. Work with community gardeners. Work with food justice organizations who are creating this grassroots momentum around changing the food system. If you have time, lobby and talk to your elected representatives about the flaws in the food system. Outside of your personal consumption habits, there's actually a lot more you can do that's just as or more important.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and FoodPrint.org, which is a project of the GRACE Communications Foundation. Special thanks to FoodPrint staff, Ryan Nebeker and Katherine Sacks, to Doctor Urvashi Rangan, Patty Lavera, Doctor Marion Nestle, Kristen Strader of HEAL Food Alliance, and Errol Schweitzer. You can find us at www.FoodPrint.org, where we have this podcast, as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and more. If you've been enjoying the show, we hope you'll leave us a review on Apple or wherever you listen to podcasts.