Like Your Labels?

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in circuit lies…

—Emily Dickinson

At least half the world eats food without text and figures, but those who seek reassurance from labels are increasingly worried or confused by what they read. The topic of food labels is large—my study alone contains fifteen linear feet of related files. Here I would like to share some impressions from my monitoring of United Kingdom, United States, and European Union labels (other examples are not considered here). Surprisingly, there is no international referee for food labels, even though labels for all products are changing rapidly. At least Twitter has taken over some label monitoring. What better small-scale critique could there be?

Most consumers are nonplussed by the inscrutable chemical abbreviations on labels, the distinctions between figures for salt and sodium, the suggestions of hazards when something is “unwashed” or “E”-numbered. Labels try to avoid the apprehensions that anthropologist Mary Douglas explains in Purity and Danger—that a label on our foreheads listing all the chemicals in our bodies, or our bacteria content, would frighten us away from chewing our fingernails. Labels try instead to appeal to our sense of responsibility, as well as to our inquisitiveness. However, most people who read labels cannot recall much of them later, unless they were looking for allergy warnings. We tend to glance at labels to feel conscientious. They are like formulas that a dull teacher has written in chalk: we simply put them aside, or we intend to eat only two taco chips instead of twenty.

Here I present a few traditional concerns of labels, followed by some more recent subjects that label writers are addressing, based mainly on environmental regulations.

Cooking times. Carefully worded labels once declared a broad cooking time for a fresh turkey or a heat-and-serve meal, but issues of liability have produced a new genre of nannying. The New York Times made a crusade out of the sixty-nine–cent Banquet readymade meat pie, for which a four-step diagram instructs the “cook” to insert a particular thermometer to test in several strategic places that the heat of the pie has reached 165 degrees. Of course, this absolves the manufacturer (ConAgra in this case) of liability should someone fall ill from eating a preprocessed, undercooked meat pie; it also makes the label intimidating. The upscale UK supermarket Waitrose includes a label instruction on pork to cook “until the juices run clear” (difficult to judge if you are stir-frying) and until “there is no pink meat,” relying on definitions of pink that rival President Clinton’s use of the word sex. In regard to succulence, labels nowadays push us to err on the side of caution, saying we should overcook game, duck, chicken, pork, shellfish, and fish. Pink has become a scare-word for some children, and when faced with cured ham on his plate, a friend’s child frowned and asked, “Is it raw?”

Water added. This labeling battle was fought and temporarily lost. Sometimes a label will tell you that the weight of a product includes a certain amount of injected water, but the days when water oozed from bacon as it fried or when chicken breasts deflated like balloons may have passed. This labeling is not unimportant, however: Water content is an index of quality. Certain beer used to be called “small beer” because it was made weaker by water. Many labeled foods are now “small” in this sense.

Ironically, the consumption of fresh water required for a food to emerge is a statistic many people now seem to want. They have been warned by reports on water shortages that say Asian rice, even more than beef, is to be avoided for environmental reasons. It may also be better to dress in cow-hide than in cotton, if water consumption is on the label.

Fat content. The separate listing of trans fats has made buyers more aware, but what is next best? Palm oil? Fish fats that taint other flavors? I like Salvador Dalí’s description of his creativity as “frying up my thoughts” and liberally use
a variety of oils, but their labels offer poor guidelines on what is best to use and when. Neither do they compare the nature of butterfat—used so lavishly by Julia Child—to that of generic vegetable oil. The simple-minded will say that olive oil is “all good.” Certainly the big winner in the label wars has been the fat from olives.

California restaurants are now required to put “fat” figures on their meals, and concerned customers have even been known to chide strangers whose children they see enjoying macaroni and cheese. This is the kind of guilt management that labels privately encourage at home. But I am reminded of friends in my childhood who encouraged me not to sing certain lines in certain hymns—“because they’re not true.” Labels are there to be mentally edited.

There is further confusion over the viscosity of fat suspended in dairy. In different countries cream is variously labeled as “single,” “half and half,” “clotted,” and so on, but no labels explain just how thick and palatable the product is. Shoppers would like some indication of the cream’s sensory quality, but how do you describe mouthfeel in label talk? (“It sticks to your teeth?”) Labelers have never agreed on how to describe sour cream created without cultures. Ice cream labelers have a problem, too—en sorbets are now described as “smooth and creamy”!

There is a level of fat-citing that takes nutrition to the extreme. Various labeling proposals for the UK and the EU would impose a system of “traffic lights” for fat content. Skin-on chicken pieces might get a red alarm, while the skin-stripped portions would get a yellow light. Some advocates concede that supermarkets might zealously trim fresh meat the way they do in Finland, to avoid all fat pitfalls (and set gastronomy back for centuries). Others say that the “traffic lights” should apply only to processed foods, which no labels explain just how thick and palatable the product is. Shoppers would like some indication of the cream’s sensory quality, but how do you describe mouthfeel in label talk? (“It sticks to your teeth?”) Labelers have never agreed on how to describe sour cream created without cultures. Ice cream labelers have a problem, too—even sorbets are now described as “smooth and creamy”!

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Country of origin. The favorite origin is “more than one country.” However, even if a specific country is cited, the designation says very little about the quality and taste of a product. If you were offered “Spanish beef” or “Mexican rice,” which questions are relevant before purchase? The fantasyland of food labels is more than thin wool pulled over our eyes. The Marks and Spencer chain cites the Scottish “Loch Muir” as the source of its fish (no such loch exists), and its “Willow Farm” label is the equivalent of a film credit to one of Hollywood’s stock fictions. Marketing departments are running amok. Automobile makers in Europe are now advertising their models based as much on where the components come from as on where the car is assembled and painted. But the food industry has problems with the psychology of sourcing.

Dates. “Sell by” and “use by” dates are so flexible in their definitions, and often so inscrutable in their numerical codes, that most consumers check this information only on packaging with which they are familiar. More interesting, I think, are the irrelevant dates used to imply a vintage (an analogy with wine). The quality of olive oil from a particular estate will not change much from year to year, though very young green oil might be distinctive. The Chinese like to put “vintage” ages on everything from cured eggs to condiments. Dates on labels are probably true, but we rarely know what to make of them.

Artifice. In order to make a territorial claim for a product (and these claims are growing faster than cucumbers, as local politicians enjoy helping anything that puts their district’s name in lights), that product must either be exclusive to a place (usually difficult to prove) or incorporate a traditional skill. The UK agricultural agency Defra has begun encouraging producers to seek more exclusivity for their products, although the motive seems largely to protect label names rather than high quality. For instance, an Indian chili pepper, the Naga, has grown wild across northeast India for hundreds of years. Farmers in Dorset, England, tried to stake a claim to the unique “Dorset Naga” so it could not be grown elsewhere. Luckily, they failed. Most of these accreditations are simply selfish, but they “give good label,” as a friend of mine salaciously said.

Weight. Most of us buy by our eyes, or by the heft of a package in our hand, not by the figures on the label. Possibly we mistrust the weight as a printed statistic, but the heft can be unreliable, too (I recently purchased a box of Iranian saffron that had a gift inside, a key ring!). Currently of interest is the consequence of manufacturers’ move to much lighter containers—away from glass, into thin plastics—to save transportation costs and mitigate greenhouse effects from fuel expenditure. This move puzzles consumers who judge by feel; if given a choice between lighter or heavier packaging (on the same shelf, with the same net weight on the label), they will often still buy the heavier. Recent research published in Psychological Science shows that the heavier an object, the more seriously a person takes it.

Labels are not supposed to be marketing or rhetoric; they are intended as crutches for rational minds. Plato believed that all senses lead to deception. The written information on a label platonically confirms that we may...
be deceived by incidentals like our eyes that sense looks or our hands that sense weight. (During the Renaissance it was against the law to use candlelight in shops in broad daylight, as this changed the appearance of the meat. Perhaps we should introduce lighting laws in our supermarkets to give eye evaluations a better chance.) Food labels stand squarely in the center of debates about why we shop the way we shop. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is now conducting research on how attention to labels changes with age, using thirty-five as the arbitrary “before” and “after.” I expect they won’t answer the interesting questions.

Environmental issues. Label advocates generally fall into two camps: those who consider nutritional facts crucial (particularly the “free from” admonitions, as in fat, sugar, and additives); and those who believe labels should reveal how much the purchase has depleted the environment—as all food purchases inevitably do. Yet, according to various surveys, about 35 percent of English-speaking people find a simple “green” declaration on labels sufficient to save their conscience. Future labels could go into more detail by explaining how a certain fruit or vegetable variety measures up on issues of biodiversity. An even-longer-text might reveal the amount of fresh water used to pump up a fruit’s succulence; the plant’s growing season (and whether you are buying outside that season); the life cycle of a farmed animal; and a long list of other environmental impacts, such as how the waste from oil-pressed olives is recycled. Labels like these do not obstruct our access to anything, but they do add considerations about food that go beyond just human weight gain and nutrition; they display important consequences for future generations.

Organic. Most government authorities make the interesting distinction between plants that can be described as “organic” and those that cannot. Nature may have been the sole contributor to the process from seed to harvest, but only with a particular level of human supervision can a plant become “organic.” If you want to label a crop of chestnuts from the trees that thrive in your backyard “organic,” you must start taking notes on what you have not done.

In the United States there are now 245 nonorganic substances you can add to food and still call it “organic.” Every five years the USDA must listen to arguments about why a particular item has no organic equivalent; elsewhere in the world parallel debates are taking place. The problem is that if an organic equivalent should be discovered, continuing with the nonorganic substitute will disqualify a product from organic certification. This naturally makes a few people nervous—but only every few years. In most of the world the number of organic certifiers is increasing, because there is nobody to certify the certifiers. The system was originally seen like “banknotes” (one currency for one area). However, although you can convert the price on a label to another currency, you can’t translate all the claims. There is a tension between a romantic view of sourcing and an irritating air of nagging. The work of a label writer is tough, because the demands of the genre grow worse every year.

Natural. Though this claim is well worn, it has no real definition. In label language ham is as natural as a plover’s egg. For instance, there is a legal controversy over the label for Pepsi Natural, where instead of sweeteners the drink contains crop-grown sugar. The German chemical company BASF is working with “natural” sugar growers to develop genetic varieties that will increase yields by 25 percent. That complicates the space of a label. I am not saying that Pepsi uses anything but the sugar that your mother bought, but in that same “natural” bottle are acids for the bite in your mouth, something for the color, and so on. As with any food that carries a supermarket label, there has been more manipulation than Mother Nature would “naturally” do.

Local. The Country of Origin designation is a clumsy tool, and it is often used jingoistically. If a Londoner calculates “local” food miles, the figure should include produce from northern Europe, especially the riches that grow just across the English Channel. “Local” would not include Scottish beef, and I assure you that in Scotland no “local” food has traveled from England. At a cocktail party my attempt to define “local” turned into a heated debate. I suggested that labels could use a simple diagram, a spot in the middle of a circle representing the source of the product and the radius being clear—say, one hundred kilometers? Or why not the five hundred miles the American government uses to define “local” for prison populations? I thought I was making a joke, but guests began agreeing with me. I decided they’d had too much to drink.

Private labels. The irony of label reassurances is that they only increase the drive toward individualism. Very few affluent consumers want to purchase the average, well-known brands. The desire for distinction creates markets for new brands, for imported versions of the too-familiar, and even for retailers’ more expensive lines, promoted in the UK with slogans like “Taste the Difference.” Retailers’ private down-market, economy labels have flourished in this recession (although, interestingly, not with pet food). The signals from the plain packaging are clear, but how do the labels show what other mechanisms are at work? For the famous brands, selling low-priced single portions of coffee or shorter loaves of bread has become a way to keep the label but change the price.
Waste. Labels avoid listing more than one part of an animal or plant. For example, the minced ears and noses of mammals almost always add succulence to meat products, but labels usually do not refer to parts of an animal’s anatomy that are not sold independently at the meat counter. While the British government table-thumps about food waste, it skirts the easy avenue of redefining this “waste” as delicious and using labels to explain. Most people are squeamish about a “which bits?” discussion. A publisher I know once decided to reset a book because the author had referred to eating pigs’ “feet,” when as we all know you can only eat “trotters.”

There is just as much “waste” with crops. I buy an expensive raspberry-leaf tea and wonder where the rest of the foliage has been mulched. In many parts of the world you can buy beet greens on their own, but the leaf is now hard to find in the UK. Where has it gone if it is no longer attached to the beetroot? I grow a variety of radish solely for its salad leaf, and also a carrot-leaf variety. Courgette flowers that were once considered waste are now more expensive than lilies. Labels are the first road into this mind-changing geography, but their wise words are scarce. I recently saw a label for hot chili paste that declared “No Seeds,” because many recipes advise removing the seeds before slicing the chili. But what aversions (and waste-making) are these label writers creating?

Acceptable waste. In many places labels now warn about the avoidance of waste, yet such information does not take into account what is accepted as unusable. For example, when you buy whole fish, about 60 percent is unusable, compared to 0 percent for fish sticks. Who will peel a banana if it comes with a “50 percent waste” label? The amount discarded does lead to extra cost down the line, which consumers ultimately pay for. Food producers are especially wary now that European appliance manufacturers are facing wreee, a regulation that makes them financially responsible for recycling their machines. As a result food labeling is moving toward unrealistic “no-waste” assurances.

It is interesting, I think, that labels themselves are always waste in the end. Mary Douglas makes the point that unless we feel something “belongs” in our lives and shares our identity, we feel fine about consigning it to the rubbish. Food that we have cooked and refrigerated as a leftover, or a meal on which we spent a little more than usual, is harder to waste than any label, which is usually the first thing to land in the trash. New American legislation on children’s toys requires that the label be imprinted and last as long as the toy itself. This may change the relationship between label and product.

Sustainable and traceable. Perhaps your can of tuna should not simply say “sustainable”; perhaps it should also give some figures. Every time a label tells me something was harvested “by hand” I feel like suggesting that they at least admit to using secateurs. It is unusual for the labels on some crops to describe how they were reaped, but for others the information is there in words like “foraged” or “mown,” just as fish are “baited” or “day-boated” or otherwise enticed (as long as they are not netted). How a bird or animal dies is usually not label-worthy, although I have seen “from our own abattoir” a few times. In earlier times a meat-eater may have wondered whether the creature was killed for the table or whether it had died a natural death. And, if the former were true, whether there was trauma involved—just as Addison recoiled on hearing that the pork on his plate was a pig that had been “whipped to death” (Tatler, 21 March 1709). The role of death in our food supply is tricky to describe. If you buy a farmed fish, do you want to know which other fish died to provide its diet, and how the fish itself was killed?

Even as the word sustainable grows ever less meaningful, a wobbly concern for traceability is now evident on food labels. If you are buying goat meat in London, do you want to be told “home-raised goat” (sad, because I myself once had that pet) or “wild goat meat” (possibly sad, too), or “goat raised like a pig”? The possibility of tracing every product we eat is close at hand. However, when at a London market I bought a shoulder of lamb along with that lamb’s gorgeous lambskin for my cat’s basket, I felt I was bringing things too close. A few weeks later the farmer mailed me a photograph of his—my—lamb. That was just too much information. I looked at the cat basket and began to rethink traceability.

Manufactured products (not food) now offer several Web sites where a name or ISBN will tell you more than a label ever could about the sources of all components, the environmental costs at each stage, and so on. The work at www.grantadesign.com in Cambridge, UK, is a model. The EU, which has an eco-label scheme—the “flower” label—intends to add processed food and feed products to its surveys in the future. If in-depth surveys can “flower” detergents and shoes, then store-bought mayonnaise will be easy to assess, though you need to be linked to a Web page. In fact, there are now barcode readers for personal computers, and this is where labels are going soon. The eco-indexing at EnvirUP has looked at the environmental merits of everything from Special K to Ribena, but their research remains limited to one hundred products.
There is a useful expression among winemakers—“the label drinker,” which usually refers to someone who aspires to drink a certain label of wine. In the world of food, perhaps the counterpart is the person who buys based on the prestige of a brand rather than according to the words that appear on a label; “label eater” has a nice acid to it. “Label-eating” makes the purchaser feel better about herself in the same way that buying the “best” brand once did. Labels can reassure the buyer that her choice was astute, both nutritionally and environmentally. In any case, the evolution of label details supports Margaret Visser’s oft-quoted line, “food is never just something to eat.” The food label may be the equivalent of sending your child to primary school with his or her first c.v. ☺