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Food labels are informative, but no cure-all

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"Make mine strawberry," says a youngster and gets an ice cream cone.

The flavoring is benzyl acetate, a nitrate solvent.

His sister stays with familiar vanilla and gets piperonial, a substance widely used by exterminators to kill lice.

These according to a newsletter from the Human Ecology Group are only two of the chemicals used to flavor commercial ice cream. Others are: amyl acetate for banana flavor, a substance used as an oil paint solvent; ethyl acetate, a cleaner for leather and cloth, for pineapple; butraldehyde, an ingredient of rubber cement, nut taste; methyl aldehyde-C17, an inflammable liquid used in plastics and rubber, cherry.

As an emulsifier replacing eggs, the manufacturers use dietyl glycol, a chemical ingredient of anti-freeze and paint remover.

The point of the newsletter story was the need for labels on dairy products similiar to the new nutrition labels on canned goods.

The labels tell quite a story.

Many a shopper is finding that some of her favorite canned foods don't stack up very well on the label's nutrition chart, but at least if she chooses to buy junk food, she knows that is what she is buying.

Even the old labels which list ingredients in the order of their quantity are very useful, I didn't realize how helpful they were until I shopped in England this winter where no ingredients were listed even on brands familiar to me at home.

I was surprised at how often it occurred to me, "I wonder what's in this?" and put the can back on the shelf. I was glad to learn that labeling is coming soon.

It's only fair to say, though, that what the English market lacked in information on canned and baked goods it made up for in interesting reading matter in the produce department.

Here is what I read: okra, Kenya; green beans, Italy; pecans, U.S.A.; cocoanuts, Dominican Republic; chickory, Belgium; celery, Spain; lemons, Cyprus; grapefruit, Israel; plums, South Africa; grapes, U.S.A.; pineapple, Ivory Coast; garlic, Italy; chili, Holland; and eggplant, West Indies.

Prices of much of the produce were high but the English are able to use their gardens all winter for plants in the cabbage family, so there are usually fresh green vegetables on the table. I ate very little tinned food.

Labels, no matter how informative, are no cure-all. For instance, they don't list contaminants.

Suppose the fish comes from the Hudson River and is polluted with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) packed before fish from the river was banned.

If the label lists "artificial flavor" does this mean chemicals like those in the ice cream?

Food buying has more problems than price, bad as that is, but nutritionally things seem to be looking up a bit.

This week I was able to buy liver sausage which contained no nitrites. From the color it was plain to see it also contained no red dye.

Ground meat extended with soy beans is available and is tasty. I would rather use my soy beans in the form of grits for putting in baked dishes or add to ground meat if I choose, but soy grits are only available in health food stores.

For years I've been waiting for a commercial high-protein bread. The nearest thing I can remember is the Cornell-Messing formula in the 1940s. In this, powdered milk was substituted for one quarter of the flour. But the best tasting high-protein bread I've ever eaten was made with soy flour. This is not easy to do but certainly manufacturers could work out a method. It would make meal planning a lot easier.

Several years ago fish flour was publicized as the best possible answer to high-protein baked goods. Flour made from the whole fish was said to be as mild flavored as wheat flour.

Then it turned out that fish were not plentiful or cheap so the fish flour — at least for human consumption — never appeared on the market.

Some interesting reading matter on nutrition comes to my desk from Pennsylvania State University on experiments with single cell protein (SCP) soy products and other ways of getting more protein into the diet at low cost.

So I looked forward to attending my first annual dinner meeting of the Bucks County Agricultural Extension Service which is affiliated with the university.

Perhaps I expected too much, but it was disappointing to eat a regular meat-and-potato dinner topped off with a dessert made from refined flour, sugar, corn, starch and some fruit.

Maybe it will be more exciting next year.

Maybe there will be SCP in the rolls, sprouted tritacale in the salad, the flour unrefined and perhaps the sweetner will be the berry found a few years ago in Africa that was to be the nutritious answer to the low calory sweetner.

Maybe not.

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