

The complexity of clean label

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The consumer's perception of what is 'clean' varies by category.

CHICAGO — The term clean label has become a pillar in food industry vernacular, but it's not necessarily a term that is part of the consumer's vocabulary. For most shoppers, the clean label product development movement is more of a force that comes to life by the language on product packages and marketing materials. It encompasses more than a product's ingredient label and continues to evolve as consumers become more engaged in the farm-to-fork process.

"The consumer demand for clean food has been gaining momentum for some time," said Laurie Demeritt, chief executive officer of The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Wash. "We've now reached the point where clean label is not just

today's reality; it is the path that packaged food and beverage companies must take if brands are to remain relevant with consumers. It is but one major outcropping of the broader food cultural trend toward all things less processed and real.”



Clean label has been a purchase driver for more than five years.

Renetta Cooper, business development director, Kerry, Beloit, Wis., agreed.

“Clean label has been a purchase driver for more than five years,” she said. “Yet, confusion still abounds among consumers as well as manufacturers and brands looking to meet consumers’ needs.

“Recognizing this void, we conducted an extensive consumer survey to pinpoint specific drivers as they relate to clean label and understand the commercial opportunities related to those drivers.”



“All-natural,” “non-G.M.O.” and “no additives or preservatives” are the most common product attributes consumers

associate with clean label.

The company surveyed 2,600 adults across the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany. The study was about clean label and results showed that “all-natural,” “non-G.M.O.” and “no additives or preservatives” are the most common product attributes consumers associate with clean label.

In the United States, respondents connected product attributes ranging from “farm grown” to “sustainably produced” and “minimally processed” to “made with real ingredients” to the concept of clean label. This suggests clean label is a multidimensional opportunity for food manufacturers and brands.

“As clean label is multidimensional in the minds of consumers, it is critical for manufacturers to learn the attributes their target consumers expect from a clean label to ensure they focus on the right ingredients,” Ms. Cooper said.



A clean label heat-and-eat entree may have very different attributes than a grain-based snack.

This varies by food category. A clean label heat-and-eat entree may have very different attributes than a grain-based snack or yogurt.

The Hartman Group adds to that evolving multidimensional definition of clean label. The research firm includes “premium marketplace” in its characterization, which is shorthand for consumer demand for higher-quality foods and beverages. The premium foods typically come with a higher price tag, such as what consumers encounter with many organic and specialty foods.

It is the “if it costs more, it must be better” phenomenon. And interestingly, Kerry’s research showed that nearly 9 in 10 consumers who read labels are willing to pay more for food perceived as clean. This suggests the economics of sourcing premium ingredients should not be a deterrent in clean label product development.



Here emphasizes the locality of its ingredients.

Here and now

“The clean label moniker is emerging as a new standard for natural food products found in grocery stores,” said Megan Klein, president of Here, Carol Stream, Ill., a manufacturer of locally sourced juices, dips and salad dressings. “It is a consumer-driven movement, demanding a return to ‘real food’ and transparency through authenticity. These are foods containing natural, familiar, simple ingredients that are easy to recognize, understand and pronounce, with no artificial ingredients or synthetic chemicals.”

All of Here’s products are produced in small batches 25 miles outside of Chicago, its major market. The products contain produce grown by local farmers. It is the sourcing of local ingredients that contributes to Here’s clean label positioning.

“We make it here and distribute it only in the Midwest,” Ms. Klein said. “Every Here product tells an honest story about its relationship to the farmers who grew the ingredients, the team members who made it and the partners who made it possible.”



All of Here's products are produced in small batches 25 miles outside of Chicago.

Juice labels state "cold pressed in the Midwest with local produce." You won't find organic or non-G.M.O. claims on Here's products. The attributes are important to the company, but it's the local qualities that are most important.

"In order for food to scale, we need to create demand for more product, and that demand has to be there 365 days a year," said Nate Laurell, c.e.o. of Here. "By using Midwestern fruits and vegetables from Illinois, Indiana and Michigan in a retail capacity year-round, this line of products will allow us to reach thousands more stores than by just selling seasonal produce alone. It seems so simple, and yet it's something that has not been done. This is a footprint we plan to replicate over the next five years in markets around the country, and we hope to impact other local growing regions on a national scale. Ultimately, we want real food grown everywhere for everyone."

It is Mr. Laurell's belief that by using local produce to create retail products, the business model will solve a problem that has plagued the local food industry. It will create a longer shelf life, which will in turn allow Here to purchase a much larger quantity of product from Midwestern farms. It is a win/win scenario for all involved.



For Arla Foods, the meaning of clean label goes beyond the ingredient list and extends to traceability.

Enhancing dairy's health halo

Clean label takes a different, yet somewhat parallel spin in the dairy department. After all, fluid milk is a local-farm sourced product. But what about the sourcing of the other ingredients that go into dairy foods such as cheese, ice cream and yogurt?

That is why for Arla Foods Inc., Basking Ridge, N.J., the meaning of clean label also goes beyond the ingredients list.

“It’s not only about having ingredients a shopper can recognize, it’s also about knowing where those ingredients come from, if the company you’re buying from actually is the producer and how that company goes about its business,” said Don Stohrer, head of U.S. operations for Arla. “Is it done responsibly, sustainably and in an environmentally friendly manner? Those are questions the consumer is asking these days. Quite simply, we at Arla believe people have a right to know what’s in their food and how it is produced.”



Arla's sliced cheese business is up more than 200% compared to a year ago.

Arla is a Denmark-based dairy cooperative started in the 1880s. It is owned by 12,500 farmers across Europe and a network of partner farmers in the United States.

"We've always had a steadfast business philosophy that has remained true through the myriad consumer eating trends and fads, the rise of food industrialization, seismic shifts in the retail and food industries and the 'good for you/bad for you' nutrition 'wars,'" Mr. Stohrer said. "Simply, Arla's mission is to produce and provide the best quality dairy products in the world, free from any artificial flavors or preservatives, all while promoting sustainable dairy farming practices and strict animal welfare standards.

"Consumers today are farther away than ever from how and where their food is produced, so there's an increasing demand for more transparent food practices and simpler foods. And because of how far away society has gotten from the source of our food, there's a lot of confusion out there today."



Arla cream cheese purchases are 20% incremental to the overall cream cheese category.

Arla is trying to provide the consumer with useful information to help them make an informed decision when purchasing products. The company has always followed the philosophy of “the simpler, the better.” That is demonstrated in the company’s simple ingredients cream cheese.

“We set out to invigorate a product category historically controlled by a single brand,” Mr. Stohrer said. “Our short ingredient list — the cream, milk, salt and cheese culture — has struck a chord with consumers looking for simple, great-tasting alternatives. In fact, according to retailer data, Arla cream cheese purchases are 20% incremental to the overall cream cheese category, adding fresh new growth to a previously stagnant part of the dairy aisle.”

In the less than two years since Arla-branded products started appearing in supermarket dairy aisles, its sliced cheese business has shown significant growth and consumer adoption, as it is up more than 200% compared to a year ago.



Daisy Brand markets both full-fat and light sour cream made with only cultured cream and milk or cream. Its cottage cheese has one additional ingredient: salt.

Fortunately for the dairy industry, clean label formulations are one of its strengths. For example, Daisy Brand, Dallas, markets both full-fat and light sour cream that is made with only cultured cream and milk or cream. Its cottage cheese has one additional ingredient: salt. Products carry the tagline: “Better Ingredients. That’s the Daisy difference.”

“Dairy consumers generally have an opinion that milk and products made from milk, are clean, simple, pure, fresh from the farm,” said Cindy Sorensen, vice-president-business development, Midwest Dairy Association, St. Paul, Minn.



Pasture One markets grass-fed and finished beef from cattle not administered antibiotics or hormones.

Clean label and animal welfare

The same is mostly true for the meat and poultry department. But there, because shoppers are purchasing the actual animal, clean label includes transparency in sourcing and the farm’s practices.

Packages of meat and poultry — uncooked and prepared — increasingly are featuring claims associated with the animal’s diet and welfare. Processors are working with farmers and ranchers to understand their operations and communicate this to consumers on product packaging and web sites.

Pasture One, Petaluma, Calif., markets grass-fed and finished beef from cattle not administered antibiotics or hormones. In addition to conveying this on package labels, the company provides “ranch of origin” information, which identifies the specific ranch where the beef came from, giving credit where credit is due, according to the company.



Pasture One offers various cuts and ground beef.

“At Pasture One, we are very excited to be leaders in this great movement for better beef, better environment and better health, and support our farmers who are doing the hard work of raising cattle the right way,” said Peter Hausin, c.e.o.

The company explains that these best practices result in beef with half the fat and cholesterol of standard beef. The meat also is packed with omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid. In addition to offering various cuts and ground beef, the company uses the meat to make premium uncured hot dogs and sausages that contain no artificial nitrites or preservatives. This is all communicated on the label.

Just Bare Chicken from GNP Company, St. Cloud, Minn., a business unit of Pilgrim’s Pride Corp., markets organic and “natural/no-antibiotics ever” products and includes a four-digit code on packages. This allows consumers to trace the origin of the chicken via the company’s web site to see and learn more about the farmers who raised the chickens. Research conducted by the company in 2015 had 31% of consumers stating they would not buy chicken unless they knew where it was from and 61% said they would like to know where it came from if they could.



With Just Bare products, consumers may learn about who raised the chicken and the farms from which they came.

“We believe everyone should have the ability to follow the journey of his or her food, from farm to fork,” said Rory Biding, senior brand manager for Just Bare.

With prepared meats, minimal processing and simple ingredient statements are the new norm. That’s why many processors are choosing to use natural as their clean label statement. This includes using what is known as “natural curing” in meats such as bacon, ham, hot dogs and sausages.

The ingredients that go into breadings and batters also are being scrutinized by label-reading shoppers, in particular gatekeepers who have chicken nuggets as a household staple. Adding whole grain to batter and breading systems appears to be the leading trend in better-for-you, clean label formulating trends. Many whole grains in the marketplace also add flavor and color. Some are more applicable for breadings, while others for batters. Some allow for gluten-free formulations.



Snyder's-Lance's Snack Factory Dessert Thins are made with non-G.M.O. ingredients and void of artificial colors and flavors.

Ingredient innovations abound

The clean label phenomenon is playing out in every aisle of the supermarket. Snyder's-Lance Inc., Charlotte, N.C., is rolling out Snack Factory Dessert Thins, a line of lightly textured, airy biscuits made with non-G.M.O. ingredients and void of artificial colors and flavors. They come in brownie, chocolate chip and lemon varieties.

"We are always looking for new and inventive ways to create great-tasting snacks that people can feel good about eating," said Jennifer Bauer, vice-president of marketing.

Ingredient suppliers make clean label prepared and packaged innovations possible. Today's tool box of clean label solutions includes more naturally derived colors and flavors and non-G.M.O. staple ingredients ranging from flours to oils to sweeteners.

"Now more than ever, manufacturers require an innovative set of solutions to meet various formulation and labelling challenges to develop breakthrough products smarter and faster," said Michael Harrison, chief technology officer, Tate & Lyle, Hoffman Estates, Ill.

The company continues to grow its line of clean label starches to assist with achieving desirable textures and stability in viscous products such as condiments, gravies and soups. The most recent addition is a line of instant starches that are process tolerant and build rapid viscosity, comparable to modified instant starches.



Ingredion recently launched a multi-functional rice flour line that may enhance soup formulations.

Ingredion Inc., Westchester, Ill., markets a range of clean label, non-G.M.O. sweeteners, texturizers, proteins, fibers and functional native starches and flours, including a recently launched multi-functional rice flour line. Rice flour offers smooth, silky textures, opacity and homemade appeal without compromising on the process tolerance and

stability manufacturers expect from a modified starch. Applications testing has shown that the rice flours can enhance formulations of baby foods, soups and sauces; dairy alternatives; fruit fillings and snack products; and meats, batters and ready meals, while also offering advantages in the preparation of gluten-free and dairy-free recipes.

Morris Plains, N.J.-based Beneo markets a portfolio of clean label rice starches that function as texturizers in bakery, confectionery, dairy, convenience foods and gluten-free applications. The company offers a pure white rice starch that works especially well in poultry for enhancement. It delivers a clean look with no pinking.

Sampling tests by Texas A&M University, College Station, showed rice starch improves yields comparable to modified corn starch. A sensory test with 50 volunteers confirmed that in terms of organoleptic properties, rice starch is a viable alternative. There were no differences in taste, tenderness, juiciness and appearance between the starch solutions tested.

Essentia Protein Solutions, Ankeny, Iowa, is introducing clean label functional ingredient solutions based on proteins from pork, beef or poultry. Finely ground and injectable, the proteins improve yield, purge, texture and sliceability in fresh and processed meat products. They function as a natural alternative to phosphates and hydrocolloids and are a clean label lean-meat replacer that reduces formulation costs.



Kerry offers a clean label cheese solution that mirrors the melt, taste and appearance of traditional processed cheese.

Kerry now offers a clean label cheese solution that mirrors the melt, taste and appearance of traditional processed cheese, but only includes familiar ingredients: cheddar cheese (pasteurized milk, cheese cultures, salt, enzymes), skim milk, food starch, salt, cultured whey and cultured skim milk. With the solution, processed cheeses no longer need to include the unfamiliar ingredients of sodium phosphates, citrates, sorbic acid, emulsifiers, preservatives and hydrocolloids. Applications include macaroni and cheese, queso dip and nachos.

“Consumers have spoken loud and clear about what they expect from their food choices, and a popular demand is recognizable ingredients,” said Papao Saisnith, strategic marketing director with Kerry. “Now, it’s about making those desires possible while still creating foods that they crave.”