



Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

## SPECIAL REPORT: Consumers and 'clean' food: Where is the clean label trend going next?

By Elaine Watson+, 26-Apr-2017

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**To the casual observer, 'cleaning up' our food sounds like an eminently sensible thing to do. But where is the clean label trend going, and is ditching every ingredient you can't pronounce really the key to fixing the 'broken' food system (as Panera implies in a recent ad) or improving the health of people and the planet?**

Many food scientists – and dietitians - would clearly beg to differ, and have been calling for a more nuanced debate on 'chemicals' in food for years. But the momentum behind the clean label movement is such that this is a bandwagon that no serious food marketer can afford to jump off, says Hartman Group SVP Shelley Balanko, PhD.

*"It's about maintaining relevance for your target consumer," she tells FoodNavigator-USA. "There was a time – probably a decade ago – where you could probably still say to a large mainstream brand, don't worry about clean labels, but in a fairly short period of time, that sentiment [towards clean labels] has become mainstream.*

*"This is the food culture now, so if you want your brand to stay relevant, to have a future, this is the direction you've got to go."*

### Do the clean label 'rules' apply to everyone equally?

But will ditching GMOs, aspartame or sodium benzoate materially improve the image or the fortunes of flagging legacy brands, and if not, might resources be better spent elsewhere?

To put this in context, [replacing aspartame with sucralose](#) did not make Diet Pepsi cool again, and Unilever's costly [reformulation](#) of I Can't Believe It's Not Butter did not prompt meaningful numbers of consumers to reassess the brand or the category.

At the same time, products in on-trend categories such as plant-based 'cheeses,' 'milks' and 'meats' are garnering considerable consumer support despite the fact that many of them are packed with gums, starches, emulsifiers, stabilizers and other ingredients we're told today's consumers don't want.

While this is a phenomenon that continues to frustrate the dairy lobby, it reflects both how complex this issue is, and that if shoppers feel warm and fuzzy about your brand or your motivations, they are willing to compromise a little when it comes to your label, says Dr Balanko.

### Do you own your brand, or does the culture and the consumer own it?

So where does this leave legacy brands that are losing 'relevance' with consumers, but are too big to simply kick into the long grass? Is it worth spending a fortune to 'clean' them up?

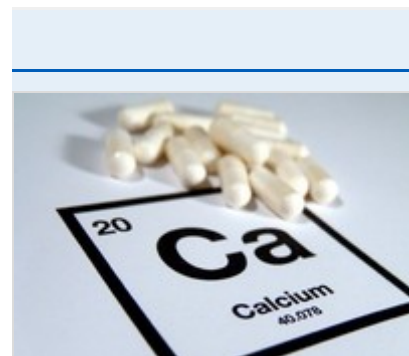
Says Dr Balanko: *"There's a certain point in a brand's life when the company that owns it and the brand manager that runs it don't really own it. The culture and the consumer own it, and no amount of marketing and reformulation will change that.*

*"But you should keep contemporizing. Invest enough to capture the dollars that are realistically going to be there, but spend your money on building a portfolio that can deliver long-term growth."*

### What does 'clean' mean?

As to where the clean label trend is going, it depends on the consumer, says Dr Balanko.

**Will consumers embrace 'clean meat'?** The Good Food Institute (GFI) is engaged in a very

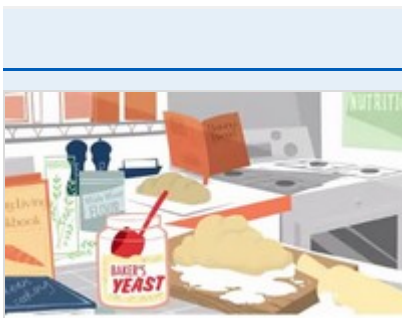


Euromonitor has seen some manufacturers [stop fortifying foods with minerals and vitamins](#) - which often have long, unpronounceable names – in order to shorten ingredients lists and clean up labels, a trend that has left many dietitians fuming, but which Hartman Group's Dr Shelley Balanko says reflects a growing suspicion of "overly engineered food."

For the majority of consumers, she says, clean eating is still about avoiding things that sound artificial or unnatural, or put more simply, eating food that is “*made simply and grown naturally.*”

But for some more ‘progressive’ consumers, the conversation is moving beyond avoiding artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners and preservatives or whatever else is on **Panera’s ‘no no’ list**, to thinking about GMOs, pesticide residues, antibiotics, sustainability, animal welfare, farming methods and food technologies, she says.

So clean eating might mean non-GMO, fair trade, sustainable, or ethically sourced: “*Consumers are layering in more things around ethical or intentional sourcing.*”



**Are flavors, sweeteners and proteins produced from microbes ‘clean label’** A big unknown is how consumers will regard the next generation of flavors, sweeteners (**Siratose**, **EverSweet**), and proteins produced in big fermentation tanks from micro-organisms that can be programmed to produce everything from gelatin (without animals) to steviol glycosides (without stevia plants).

Will shoppers embrace them as greener, cleaner and kinder to animals, or will they dismissed as ‘frankenfoods’?

Dr Rachel Cheatham at the Foodscape Group consultancy believes the technology behind animal-free brand **Perfect Day** is exciting, for example, but predicts it could be “*uphill all the way*” when it comes to selling the concept (which uses a genetically engineered yeast to produce casein - ie. milk protein) to consumers.

As for **Siratose**, a new high-potency sweetening compound found in trace levels in monk fruit, which Senomyx plans to produce on a commercial scale via fermentation, much will depend on how consumers respond to its name, says Alex Woo, Ph.D. chief executive



transparent attempt to popularize the term ‘clean’ as an alternative to ‘cultured’ or ‘lab-grown’ to describe meat produced without raising and slaughtering animals.

As firms engaged in techniques such as synthetic biology know only too well, if you don’t attempt to frame the debate before you hit the market, others will do it for you, says GFI executive director Bruce Friedrich (pictured left): “*It is **no more accurate** to say that clean meat is ‘lab grown’ than it is to say that Cheerios are ‘lab created.’*”

“*Clean meat’ is similar to ‘clean energy’ in that it immediately communicates important aspects of the technology—both the environmental benefits and the decrease in food-borne pathogens and drug residues.*”

Others, however, believe that ‘clean meat’ isn’t the best alternative to industrialized farming, including **Epic Provisions founder Taylor Collins**: “*I think it is going in the wrong direction for the natural foods industry.*”

at consultancy W2O Food Innovation.

*“Siratose sounds to me, a food scientist, like the bulk sweeteners tagatose, allulose, and ribose. But to consumers, it sounds like a ‘chemical.’”*

Hartman Group’s Dr Shelley Balanko, however, says attitudes are changing when it comes to foodtech.

*“In the last couple of years we’ve actually seen consumers embracing food technology where they think it could be kinder to the planet.”*

## Should you use the word ‘clean’ on food labels?

But what about the word ‘clean?’ Is it something packaged food companies should use in b2c communications?



Dr Shelley Balanko: ‘Consumers don’t necessarily want to see the word ‘clean’ slapped over everything’

While the term ‘clean label’ has been bandied around within the food industry for years, it’s still relatively new to consumers, with Panera probably the best known example of a brand that talks about ‘clean eating’ with consumers, says Dr Balanko.

*“Clean is one of the newer terms in consumer vernacular around quality food, and it’s still pretty new. To consumers, it’s about eating foods that are ‘uncontaminated’ with pesticides, hormones and antibiotics as well as artificial sweeteners and flavors and so on.*

*“Our research shows that the downside of the term ‘clean’ in consumer communications is that some people think it’s a bit pretentious and neurotic. There’s also a sentiment that it’s like ‘natural,’ potentially a marketing gimmick, so we would probably recommend against putting it on pack.*

*“When consumers think about clean foods they are thinking about fresh, real, less processed foods, it should be self-evident that they’re clean from looking at the ingredients list, by seeing the product through transparent packaging, for example. Consumers don’t necessarily want to see the word ‘clean’ slapped over everything.”*

## Natural, organic and beyond?

So what’s beyond clean label?

With most leading CPG brands now embracing clean-label such that it is no longer a key point of difference between ‘natural’ and ‘conventional’

brands, do players in the natural products space now have to go beyond natural & clean label, and embrace organics, or embark on some kind of social mission, to really stand out from the crowd?

Not necessarily, says Dr Balanko.

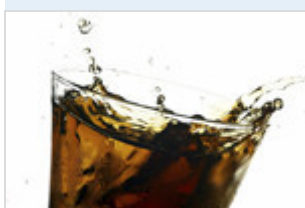
*“I don’t think simply going organic is the way these ‘natural’ brands are going to go, or should go. What they have been doing and will probably need to do more of, is tell their story, their narrative.*

*“While large brands may increasingly have the same attributes [eg. clean labels, on trend ingredients], it’s the story about how the brand came to be and the passionate people behind the brand that makes the difference and often the larger brands are lost when it comes to telling those stories; they can’t talk about small batch production and use the charismatic founder narrative.”*

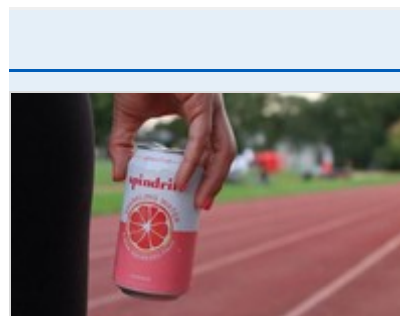
## Natural claims... still relevant?

Finally, do ‘natural’ claims still resonate?

While many stakeholders doubt whether the much-maligned word retains much value, 76% of FoodNavigator-USA readers **recently agreed** that ‘the word ‘natural’ still resonates strongly with consumers on product labels, “even



Clean label for



**Are natural flavors clean label?** A few years ago, this might have seemed like a silly question, but a recent lawsuit against Hint Inc – which was **accused of falsely advertising** its wares as ‘all-natural’ because they featured natural flavors containing propylene glycol – has focused minds.

For Bill Creelman, CEO at **Spindrift**, which recently dropped natural flavors from its sparkling water line – it’s a topic that started to move up the agenda around 2013.

*“By around 2013, 2014, the #1 question we were getting from consumers was, ‘What is in these*

*though everyone has their own definition of what it means.”*

However, Hartman Group advises companies to think carefully about how to use ‘natural’ claims on pack, and not simply because they could face a false advertising lawsuit, says Balanko.: *“Our research shows that natural is still the ultimate ideal for consumers, but on pack, it immediately raises red flags.*

*“If it’s combined with other cues consumers are looking for to establish the validity of the naturalness of a product – the ingredients, the production techniques, the sourcing, it won’t do any harm. But as something to be leveraged? No.”*

Interested in clean label trends? Sign up for our **FREE to attend webinar** : Where next for clean label? on May 23. The event, sponsored by **Farbest** , **ADM** , **Ingredion** , and **Cargill** , explores...

- **The evolution from clean label 1.0 to clean label 2.0**
- **Who really cares about clean label?**
- **How do consumers understand different elements of clean label?**
- **What does it take to clean up labeling?**

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**beverages:** At beverage expert **Imbibe** , marketing manager Ilana Orlofsky says formulators are increasingly seeking alternatives to [corn-derived] caramel colors owing to concern about GMOs and 4-MEI [although leading suppliers have developed non-GMO variants, and dramatically lowered 4-MEI]; carrageenan [which experts say has been unfairly demonized]; sugar alcohols such as xylitol and erythritol [thanks to their hard-to-pronounce names and production methods]; and in some cases, even natural flavors [see above].

*‘natural flavors’? Which makes sense if you think about it, since the only ingredients in our sparkling waters were water, juice, and natural flavors.*

*“The problem is that when you buy natural flavors, they are not required to disclose exactly what is in there. You can ask hard questions, but we really never got to the point where we could definitively say what was going in our product and I just wasn’t comfortable with that, so we began gradually making the transition away from using natural flavors.”*

## What's in a name?



**Campbell Soup backs 'potassium salt' petition: A more consumer-friendly name will 'advance public health goals'**

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