

When Food Companies Say “Clean Label,” Here’s What Consumers Understand



“Clean label” is a term that’s not part of consumers’ everyday vocabulary. “Clean” encompasses much more than what’s listed (or not listed) on a product’s ingredient label. While the food and beverage industry has latched onto the term, consumers approach the concept from a distinct perspective.

The Contemporary Consumer Meaning of “Clean”

Consumers continue to look for the hallmarks of fresher, less processed foods and beverages.

When shopping:

65% of consumers say they look for food and beverages that **have the shortest list of ingredients**

58% of consumers say they look for food and beverages that **contain only ingredients I recognize**

As with natural and less processed products, consumers expect “clean” foods to be self-evident. This is what “clean” means today:

Uncontaminated.

The heart of clean heavily overlaps perceptions of natural, organic and less processed: simple, not interfered with, free from “impure” additions at any stage (made simply, grown naturally).

Transparent.

Clean also connotes a product that is both knowable and forthcoming about its ingredients and practices.

The Building Blocks of “Clean Label”: How Consumers Evaluate Whether a Product Is “Clean”

Consumers evaluate multiple attributes to determine if a product meets their criteria for “clean label.” Terms such as authentic, real, simple, clean and fresh are often used interchangeably by consumers. They look to a number of cues to determine whether a product encompasses these ideals – specifically:

- WHAT’S IN IT?
- HOW WAS IT MADE?
- WHO MADE IT?