

Food Additives Go Au Natural

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A quick Google search of “food additives” yields first-page results including the terms “avoid,” “scariest,” “evil” and “sketchy.” The court of public opinion has handed down a verdict that food manufacturers would be wise to heed. By popular demand, the natural additives are coming.

Shorter, simpler and therefore “cleaner” food labels are in high demand by health-conscious consumers. Manufacturers face a reformulation challenge: consistently adapt the product to the previous version’s flavor, color, mouthfeel and shelf stability. Some large food manufacturers are complying piecemeal with natural additive demand while attempting to maintain the quality of their products.

Kraft Foods is on a natural-additive tear. Last October, Kraft vowed to cut artificial dyes from three varieties of mac and cheese that come in kid-friendly pasta shapes. In February, the company pledged to remove artificial preservatives from its most popular varieties of Singles cheese slices by replacing sorbic acid with natamycin. This naturally occurring anti-fungal agent, produced by bacteria during fermentation, is commonly found in soil. What’s so bad about sorbic acid? It’s just not “natural.”

“Natural” lacks legal definition, but has generally agreed-upon parameters. The FDA washes its hands of total authority, admitting that “[b]ecause of inherent limitations of science, FDA can never be absolutely [emphasis theirs] certain of the absence of any risk from the use of any substance.” Hence consumer demand for natural food

additives.

What's all of the food fuss about? I trace the current wave of the new American food consciousness to Michael Pollan. The author, in his 2008 New York Times Best Seller "In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto," postulated that it's healthiest to abstain from eating foods and ingredients your grandmother wouldn't recognize. Pollan refers to highly manufactured foods as "food-like substances." Cue the rush to all things natural in order to promote health in an era riddled with obesity and chronic disease.

As international trade erases borders, consumers are increasingly turning to foods whose sources and ingredients are more transparent. People who spend their days inundated by technology are finding comfort in simple, classic foods and home cooking. But most food purists simply can't spend all of their extra hours in a flour-dusted apron. The next-best alternative? Eat processed foods that contain as few ingredients as possible, preferably natural. That's where manufacturers come in.

Consumers want transparency and choice. If they can afford it, they'll avoid health risks. In the information age, consumer sentiment is forcing the government's hand.

For instance, the FDA is currently investigating caramel coloring in soft drinks and other foods after Consumer Reports tested them for chemical 4-methylimidazole (4-Mel), an impurity formed at low levels in some caramel coloring during manufacturing. The FDA hasn't established a maximum 4-Mel level, though Consumer Reports urged the agency to set one.

When it comes to additives, the FDA is charged with finding reasonable certainty of no harm to consumers when used as suggested. Note that recently banned trans fats were considered innovative when Proctor & Gamble began selling "crystallized cottonseed oil," branded as Crisco, in 1911. They were effectively banned mere months ago. Wary consumers might be ahead of their time.

Manufacturers' investigations into more natural ingredients encourages a shift in the additive market. Packaged Facts has acknowledged slack and falling demand in several artificial food additive categories, and forecasts that R&D within the natural additives industry will lead to development of new natural additives and colorings. This transition to natural ingredients will be easier for large manufacturers whose economies of scale afford them more flexibility, but eventually small manufacturers are likely to go with the natural additive flow.

Is your company considering changing formulations to reduce artificial additives? Drop me a line at [@foodmfged](#) [2] if you'd like to discuss your product reformulation strategy and experience.

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