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By Christine J. Hager

indicated little change in ground beef consumption in 1977.

Consumers prefer lean ground beef. Nearly half of the food shoppers interviewed said they purchased ground chuck, slightly over one-fourth said they purchased extra lean, and an equal proportion said they purchased ground round. Only about one-third said they purchased regular or non labeled ground beef (see chart).

The interviewed shoppers estimated that nearly three-fourths of the ground beef they buy is a leaner type. About 28 percent was ground chuck; 17 percent, extra lean; and 12 percent, ground round (see chart). Only 18 percent of the ground beef purchased was regular and 3 percent was not labeled.

The popularity of leaner ground beef appears greatest in households with incomes above \$25,000 and in smaller households. About 90 percent of the ground beef was estimated to be a leaner variety in homes with the highest incomes. Reported use of the fatter ground beef was greater in households in Southern states, those with shoppers 25 years or younger, and those with an elementary education.

Consumer satisfaction with ground beef appears to be generally high. Consumers were asked how satisfied they were with the juiciness, tenderness, flavor, and amount of fat in the ground beef they purchased in recent months. Tenderness and juiciness ranked highest in satisfaction while the amount of fat ranked lowest. About four-fifths of the consumers said they were always or almost always satisfied with the tenderness or juiciness of the ground beef they buy. Satisfaction with ground beef flavor was also high. Slightly

over three-fourths said they were always or almost always satisfied with the flavor of the ground beef.

However, despite the purchase of large quantities of 'lean-type' ground beef, satisfaction with the amount of fat was significantly lower than for other eating characteristics. While three-fifths said they were always or almost always satisfied with the amount of fat, one-fourth said they were only sometimes satisfied with the fat and 14 percent said they were seldom or never satisfied.

Satisfaction varies with age and education of food shoppers. Those with college educations and those under 25 were less satisfied with the ground beef they purchased. Two-thirds of the college graduates were always or usually satisfied with the flavor of ground beef purchased, and they were buying higher-than-average amounts of leaner ground beef. Forty-three percent of the shoppers below 25 years of age were satisfied with the amount of fat, compared with 73 percent of those 65 years or over. One reason was the type of ground beef purchased. About 70 percent of the ground beef purchased by younger shoppers was the leaner type, compared with 80 percent for the elderly.

Consumers were also asked about the use of, and satisfaction with, burger cookers. About one-fourth of the households used burger cookers. Satisfaction was mixed. Nearly half said they were very satisfied. Thirty percent said they were somewhat satisfied, but one-sixth indicated they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with the appliance. Both the younger and better educated shoppers expressed relatively less satisfaction with the burger cookers.

People search for an easy, clear, and painless way to get the information they want. Food labels are an example. They provide information in order to help cut down on the number of trials and errors and reduce the risk of making wrong choices.

But are the present food labels giving consumers the information they want and need? Are they written in a form they can use? Some people think not. In a speech before the recent Conference on Nutrition and the Food System, Martha Cohen summarized the problem, 'Existing food labeling frequently fails to provide adequate information in a usable fashion, while extraneous and distracting information is commonplace.'<sup>1</sup>

Carol Tucker Foreman, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services, and Donald Kennedy, Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, both agree that food labels are important consumer tools and that Government labeling policies need to

TABLE 1.—SATISFACTION WITH CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUND BEEF PURCHASED

Characteristic	Percent					Number of responses
	Always	Almost always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	
Juiciness	35	45	15	4	1	1241
Tenderness	37	46	14	2	1	1237
Flavor	36	41	19	3	1	1239
Amount of fat	25	35	26	9	5	1237

<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Martha. 'Who Owns the Food Label?', speech presented at the Conference on Nutrition and the Food System II, June 3 and 4, 1978, p. 2.

consider how the information on labels might be best presented for consumer use.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), USDA, and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) are currently holding public hearings on the labeling topic. The goal is 'to learn directly from consumers what information they want on food labels.' Policies can then be developed to provide information consumers want and can understand (HEW News, June 8, 1978, p. 18-21)

### Costs and Benefits

However, consumers do not always agree on the information they want, the amount of detail, or the presentation. Too much information adds to 'information overload' or, at least, requires consumers to sift through fine print and unwanted information to find the answer. Some information may be crucial to a small segment of the population, but quite useless to most consumers. Is it worth the cost to include those items on the label?

Who benefits from labeling and how much time, money, and effort is saved by what kinds of information? Some benefits are clear—the ability to find or avoid the product again, the price and quantity of contents, etc. Other benefits are not so easy to assess.

Do people eat better or choose nutritious foods with greater ease because of nutritional labeling? Do grades and standards aid consumers in making choices or are the criteria such that the information is not usable? Do consumers have a safer, more dependable food supply because of food labeling? How much safer and more dependable? Do labels really help consumers cut costs or do they entice consumers to buy more and higher quality items? And how are benefits of food labeling counted, anyway?

On the other side, new regulations, more information, changes in policies do cost the industry something. Much of the cost of adding or changing

information is passed onto consumers. In addition, there is just so much information that will fit on a label. Something has to give—either the information already there, fewer recipes, and/or higher prices for packaging.

### Functions of Labels

The use and comprehension of labels relate primarily to the presentation of information and the importance of information to consumers. Promotion and education may increase both the ease of using the information and the desire for that information. The function and type of labeling also affect what consumers do with the information.

Labels perform three basic functions. First, they tell people what the product is, who makes or distributes it, and something about what ingredients are contained in it. Consumers can then decide whether to try, avoid, repurchase, or discard the product.

Second, labels give some information about quality and likely performance. Grades and standards set certain criteria. Requirements that foods conform to certain levels of tolerance and definition help assure that products meet food safety criteria. Nutritional information allows consumers to choose products that conform to certain nutrient or caloric levels or, at least, perform better, according to preference, than another product.

Third, labels facilitate comparisons with some degree of assurance that information on the label is not deceptive or misleading. Products that do not perform as claimed may be identified and eliminated from the market place or, at least, from the consumer's grocery basket.

### Information About Products

Labels describe to consumers what they are buying. For many products, names alone give the answer because the names are simple, straightforward and in common use. But names such as

'daisy roll,' 'family steak,' and 'smoked turkey ham,' may cause problems in interpretation. This is particularly true for some of the names of meat cuts and the fabricated, processed, or imitation food products.

The USDA does have definitions for some foods, such as 'stew,' to assure that a minimum amount of meat or poultry is included, but other product names are voluntarily standardized or they present questions of definition. The American Meat Institute has recommended a list of standardized names of meat cuts but the decision to use the names, rather than the vague, familiar terms like 'family steak,' is left with the packers, distributors, and retailers.

Imitation, substitute, or fabricated foods pose problems because it is often not clear that they are replacements for more natural products. For example, 'smoked turkey ham' is meat taken from the thigh portion of the turkey, cured and flavored to taste like ham. If the name, 'smoked turkey ham,' is not adequate, what should it be called?

### Ingredient Labeling

To clarify what foods are and what they consist of, the listing of ingredients in order of prominence becomes important information. Consumers with concerns about certain ingredients can locate them in the listing and see their position relative to other ingredients. Efforts are underway to improve the presentation of ingredients so consumers have more usable information available.

First, some products are not labeled with ingredients. Some ingredients are not listed specifically on the labels. For example, each spice and artificial coloring is not necessarily identified nor is the waxing on fruits and vegetables.

Second, some ingredients are identified with phrases or chemical names that are meaningless to most consumers. Consumers may not want to spend the time and

effort to learn what the ingredients are or what they do. They may avoid products or buy them and hope the ingredients will not be harmful.

There is concern about the effects of many ingredients and clearer presentation of all ingredients has been encouraged by USDA and FDA. The question of safe and suitable ingredients is receiving attention. Additives for coloring, presentation, food safety, and other uses are being checked.

The amount and continued use of some ingredients such as nitrites, saccharin, colorings, sugar and other additives or preservatives are also being considered. Consumers are concerned about whether we need all the additives now used in foods, the high levels of sugars and other sweeteners, and the amounts of fat in meat and other products. Can products be grown distributed, and processed without these ingredients or without the high levels and still be safe?

Industry, on the other hand, is concerned that consumers will not buy products if they change the ingredients and the taste is different. The controversy has prompted recommendations that labels include a percentage listing of ingredients so consumers can look for ingredients of concern.

#### **Quality, Safety, and Performance**

The USDA and FDA set certain standards of identity, establish grades, and enforce specific required levels of tolerance to provide consumers with some simple basis of comparison and to establish some level of performance. One difficulty is that criteria used to establish grades, standards, and levels have not always been the criteria consumers would use. As a result, some fear that consumers either misinterpret the grades and standards or ignore them.

#### **Nutritional Labeling**

Presentation of the nutritional content of foods, particularly

processed foods, is a complex issue. Nutrition information must be contained on all foods about which the processor makes a nutritional claim and on foods that are enriched with essential nutrients. Other foods may also contain nutritional information. Both the FDA and USDA have approved the use of the same type of labeling. USDA regulates its use on meat and poultry products while FDA regulations apply to other foods.

The intent of nutritional labeling policies and regulations is to help consumers choose diets that are healthy and well-balanced. One concern is whether nutritional information is presented in such a way that consumers can improve their diets at the lowest cost. For example, serving sizes may not be appropriate or may differ so much from one brand to another that comparisons are time-consuming. Second, the information presented may be too complex or technical for consumers to understand. It may also be difficult to translate the nutritional content of each food into total food intake.

This discussion brings up the question of advertising claims and the competition among processors to make their products appear more nutritious. Fortified foods by definition can, on the food label, appear to be more nutritious than unlabeled or unfortified foods. In addition, excesses of some nutrients and ingredients may be harmful.

The government develops guidelines so that boundaries can be defined for claims about 'low sodium,' 'low fat,' etc. These definitions are somewhat arbitrary, but are intended to help describe foods for consumers rather than simply providing data. Without such guidelines consumers may be confused about how to interpret nutritional information.

#### **Consumer Education and Protection**

Clearly, labeling policies and regulations are increasing the amount of information available to

consumers. Claims, names, and other information are being scrutinized to decrease the amount of misleading and false information consumers must process. In addition, the government is seeking to improve the presentation of information and to educate consumers on the use of information.

Consumers are encouraged to use the information on labels. But how much time do consumers really want to spend for the necessary education and how will the promotion of such labeling be accomplished?

Policy makers need to consider the usefulness of information supplied and the format in which it is presented.

#### **Consumer Responsibilities**

Government agencies at the State, local, and Federal levels have established mechanisms for receiving consumer complaints, suggestions, and comments about food labels, advertising claims, and new regulations. When rules and regulations are proposed, they are first reviewed within the appropriate government agency and are then published in the Federal Register. The public is invited to comment within 30 to 90 days. Extensions are often granted for more controversial issues. Hearings are also set up to receive consumer comments. After the comment period, final regulations may be issued or revised proposals published for comment.

In addition to making known their response to policies, practices, and proposed regulations, consumers also have a responsibility to use the available product information.

Labels can help to alert consumers to new products or changes in existing ones. Information about ingredients, nutrition, freshness, safety, and definitions of quality or performance can give consumers a wider choice of criteria on which to make decisions. Getting the most value for the money is often not as simple as finding the least expensive product.