

When it's **really** worth spending extra on food

LABELS CAN TRICK YOU INTO WASTING MONEY. HERE ARE THE ONES THAT MATTER AND A BUNCH THAT DON'T DESERVE YOUR DOLLARS.



Organic Oreos? Yep. You can also find organic Ragu pasta sauce and Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. Organic foods, including fruits, meats, and dairy, may not be on your shopping list, but odds are you're reaching for them anyway. It's getting so easy to buy what seem to be better-for-you-and-the-planet versions of your favorite products. Even Wal-Mart has gone organic.

Foods certified "organic" are often worth the extra money. They're produced under federal rules that in some cases make them safer, better for the environment, and maybe even more nutritious. But there are lots of other labels that can fake you out. The "natural" label, for example, gets slapped on all kinds of products. "But it's often not much more than conventional food that's been marked up," says Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, a nonprofit public-interest group based in Minnesota. "I always treat it as a red flag that I'm about to get ripped off."

But even products with labels that are legit, including most organics, aren't always worth putting in your cart. One big reason is that more are coming from places as far away as China. Long-distance shipping gobbles up lots of fuel and generates pollution. And all that food is being produced worlds away from U.S. regulators.

So what labels can you trust? Before you're tempted to buy a carton of "cage-free" eggs or a can of "dolphin safe" tuna, read on. Then the next time you're in the supermarket, you won't be tempted to splurge on products that sound healthful or planet-friendly but may not be. Also, check out the Eco-labels center at GreenerChoices.org, run by Consumers Union, the publisher of this magazine, for more on how to avoid food labeling rip-offs.

Food labels

What's worth it and what's not

Meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy

WORTH IT

USDA Organic/Organic
This label is the real deal. It certifies that animals are given 100 percent organic feed, which helps you avoid toxins such as arsenic in conventional feed, and that the product is friendlier to the environment. Livestock can't be fed animal byproducts like slaughter-house waste and chicken droppings. Products from cloned animals or their offspring are also banned. In addition, the rules prohibit irradiation, antibiotics, and growth hormones, which are given to conventionally raised animals to speed up growth and treat health problems that might result in part from crowded and unsanitary feedlot conditions and industrial diets. Farms that produce organic foods are inspected by USDA-accredited certifiers. Companies that handle or process organic food must be certified too. That's not to say the label is without critics. For example, one of the rules is that animals must have access to the outdoors and/or pasture and can't be continuously confined. But the amount of access for dairy



• Vitamin A & D
• 1% milkfat
• Dairy not treated with rBGH*

Not treated with rBGH/No hormones administered or added (milk and dairy)
These labels mean that cows were not given recombinant bovine growth hormone, known as rBGH (or rBST), which increases the risk of udder infections and can lead to increased antibiotic use. The FDA allows this claim on milk and dairy if farmers sign affidavits saying they haven't injected their cows with the production-stimulating drug.

Certified Humane
See page 46 for details on this label.

cows and chickens hasn't been clearly defined, and that has stirred up a lot of controversy. For more on the issue, see "Food Fight," page 44. You may see organic labels from organizations like the Colorado Department of Agriculture, because the USDA accredits different groups to certify organics. One label that goes even further than organic is biodynamic, which is also verified by a third party. But it's tough to find except at farmers markets.



MIGHT BE WORTH IT

No antibiotics used or administered/Raised without antibiotics (red meat and poultry)
These labels should mean that animals have not received any antibiotics. Although there may not be any independent certification, the USDA can hold manufacturers accountable. The agency recently pushed Tyson Foods to qualify its "Raised Without Antibiotics" claim on chicken because it uses feed additives called ionophores that the agency classifies as antibiotics.

No hormones administered (beef)
This label may be meaningful on beef because it tells you that the animal was not given synthetic hormones. But it's illegal to use those hormones in poultry and pork production, so if you see this label on pork or poultry products, including eggs, it's meaningless.

Grass-fed (beef)
The USDA Process Verified shield paired with the claim grass-fed means that an animal ate only grass and had continuous access to pasture during the growing season, and that the certified farms agreed to be inspected by the USDA.

But there's a loophole: Producers who used the grass-fed claim prior to November 2007 can continue doing so without having to meet these new requirements. Also, the claim is not necessarily meaningful on dairy, pork, or poultry because there are no current standards for those products and there may be no organization verifying the claim. One way to ensure that you get truly grass-fed meat is to look for the "100% Grass Fed" label, which gives producers less wiggle room.

BUYER BEWARE

Free range/Free roaming
You would think the animal spent its life outdoors. But the rules for these labels are weak. The rule for poultry, for example, is only that outdoor access be made available. So if a coop door was open for 5 minutes a day, regardless of whether the chickens went outside, poultry could be labeled free range. Also, the label might not be certified by an independent party. And the USDA has defined the claim only for poultry, not eggs.

Cage-free
A cage-free label does not ensure a chicken had any time to peck around outdoors. See page 47 for details.

Natural
It means nothing artificial was added, although meat can be pumped up with broth and water. And the label doesn't have anything to do with the way animals were raised or fed.

Coffee and chocolate

WORTH IT

USDA Organic/Organic
Organic coffee and chocolate are produced without the use of synthetic fertilizers or the strongest pesticides, which prevents pollution and protects farm workers. Fertilizer made from sewage sludge, which is used to produce many conventionally farmed products, isn't allowed. Genetic engineering—altering a plant's DNA—and irradiation are banned as well. And the farm must rotate crops to prevent erosion and depletion of soil nutrients. Green Mountain

Coffee Roasters, Starbucks Coffee, and Newman's Own are some of the brands that offer certified organic coffees and chocolates.

Fair Trade Certified
When you see this label on coffee and other products, such as chocolate, hot chocolate, cocoa powder, fruit, rice, sugar, and spices, it means that a fair price is guaranteed to the farmers. Why should you care? Because many farm workers toil away in extreme poverty, forced to deal with middle-men who take a big cut of the profits. The organization



that certifies the label is TransFair USA, a nonprofit group. Its program also supports credit plans and training for farm workers. The Fair Trade



2 WAYS TO SPOT ORGANIC RIP-OFFS

Watch out for ...

- ORGANIC PRODUCE PLACED NEAR REGULAR PRODUCE**
Grocers are legally required to stack organic fruits and vegetables where they won't be exposed to water runoff from the misting of conventional produce, which could contaminate organic items with pesticide residue. So if you see organic produce stored below conventional produce, you might want to find somewhere else to shop, or complain to the store manager.
- NONORGANIC FOODS IN ORGANIC SECTIONS**
Nonorganic foods are sometimes placed under "organic" signs or in the organics section of the store; for example, "all natural yogurt" in an organic dairy case. You may find organic and "natural" foods jumbled together in the aisle, but those labels don't mean the same things. Make sure you read all the labels and look for the organic seal. Don't assume that everything in the organic section is actually organic.

Certified label also limits the use of harmful pesticides, and encourages sustainable farming, especially in developing countries. Some brands that offer Fair Trade Certified coffees and chocolates are Peet's Coffee & Tea, Starbucks Coffee, and Dagoba. For more info, go to www.transfairusa.org.

Rainforest Alliance Certified

The nonprofit Rainforest Alliance verifies that certified products have been grown using measures to conserve water, soil, and wildlife habitats, and to limit chemical pesticides. The label also means that farm

laborers are paid at least minimum wage rates. Fruit, juice, nuts, and tea can also be Rainforest Alliance Certified. For certified products, check the site at www.rainforest-alliance.org.

Bird Friendly (found only on certified organic coffee products)

The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center's Bird Friendly program certifies that coffee has been grown under conditions that support healthy bird habitats. For example, it must be grown under a tree canopy with a minimum of 40 percent shade, and it must be grown

THE FAIR TRADE CERTIFIED LABEL LIMITS HARMFUL PESTICIDE USE AND ENCOURAGES SUSTAINABLE FARMING.

according to USDA organic standards, which means that farmers can't use chemical pesticides. For more information, go to www.nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Coffee. At the site, click on your state for a list of local stores that sell products with the Bird Friendly logo.

MIGHT NOT BE WORTH IT

Shade-grown (coffee)

Coffee grown in shade requires fewer pesticides and encourages biodiversity. But the words on a coffee container don't mean much if they're not associated with a certifying organization like the Rainforest Alliance or the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center.

Seafood

MIGHT BE WORTH IT

Farm-raised/wild-caught Those labels, as well as country-of-origin labels, are government regulated. They tell you where the fish came from, and in some cases one is better than the other. It depends on the type of fish. You might want to choose wild-caught salmon, for example, over farm-raised because it has fewer contaminants like PCBs. On the other hand, farm-raised tilapia is a good choice. To figure out which fish are best wild-caught or farm-raised, consult the seafood shopping advice at sites such as BlueOcean.org/seafood that can help steer you toward

seafood that isn't overfished or loaded with toxins. (See caption below for more sites.)

BUYER BEWARE

Dolphin Safe Federal law regulates the use of these words and similar language that suggests dolphins are protected. But the law doesn't require certification for all tuna labeled dolphin-safe. And there isn't any universal system in place to ensure that no dolphins were harmed or killed in the process of fishing for all tuna labeled as dolphin-safe. The National Marine Fisheries Service, for example, only verifies tuna caught from a

specific region—not all tuna that is labeled dolphin-safe.

Marine Stewardship Council

This nonprofit group's labeling program aims to promote sustainable fishing practices. It accredits organizations to certify companies that want to use the MSC logo. But the organization has been criticized for the difficulties it has certifying fisheries in developing countries and for not taking into consideration labor problems.



FUGHEDDABOUTIT!

Organic This is one case in which it never pays to buy organic, because the USDA has not yet developed organic certification standards for seafood. Fish is sometimes labeled organic despite the presence of contaminants such as mercury and PCBs. California passed a law that bans organic labeling on fish and other seafood until either state or federal certification standards are established. And some stores, including Whole Foods Market, now have a policy of not labeling seafood organic.

WHICH FISH?

The best way to choose what fish to buy is to print out a shopping list at www.blueocean.org/seafood, www.seafoodwatch.org, or www.oceansalive.org.

GOING LOCAL

When it really pays to shop at farmers markets for your food

If you buy organic at least in part because it's better for the planet, you may be wondering what to do when all you can find at the store are organic mangoes from Sri Lanka, apples from New Zealand, or carrots from Israel. How "green" is your purchase if it has been shipped thousands of miles, in vessels consuming fossil fuels and belching greenhouse gases along the way?

In addition to the environmental issues, there are questions about whether some imported products are subject to the same oversight as those that are produced in the U.S. Critics say organic imports from China in particular deserve more scrutiny because of questionable oversight, and the country's poor food safety standards and polluted soil and water. A 2006 USDA report found that "widespread pollution, high pest infestations, and a long history of heavy chemical fertilizer and pesticide use make growing crops organically difficult in most areas of China."

"I think consumers should be wary of all products from China at the moment," says Marion Nestle, Paulette Goddard professor of nutrition at New York University. "It looks like China is trying to get its food safety act together, but until it does, it makes sense to buy local." Locally produced foods aren't shipped very far, they're fresher, and many people swear that they're tastier as well.

"One of my biggest life-changing moments was tasting a peach at a farmers market. I hadn't tasted something that good in years," says Diane Hatz, director of Sustainable Table, a nonprofit that educates consumers about sustainable food. Activists believe that supporting local, family-scale farms is important for the long-term viability of our food system. The good news is that it's getting easier to find local foods. Although



organic foods are still a small percentage of grocery offerings, many chains, including Wegmans and Whole Foods Market, are now carrying them. Farmers markets have the best selection, and hundreds of new ones have opened in recent years. Although many local farms aren't certified organic, some go beyond what would be required

for certification. Others are "certified biodynamic," a more rigorous standard than organic. To find places to buy local produce, go to www.localharvest.org or www.eatwellguide.org. Or join a community-supported agriculture program, which will give you a weekly supply of fresh produce for a season. It generally costs \$300 to \$500 for a season to feed a family of four. Smaller households can save money by splitting a share. For info, go to www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml or www.localharvest.org/csa.

"China is trying to get its food-safety act together but until it does, it makes sense to buy local."

WENDELL WEBBER

KEITH GOLDSTEIN/PHOTONICA/GETTYIMAGES

Fruits, vegetables, beverages, pasta, oils, and packaged foods

WORTH IT—USUALLY

USDA Organic/Organic
Organic is the way to go, especially when it comes to produce that tends to have high pesticide residues when grown conventionally. (See page 45 for fruits and veggies you should always buy organic.) But on packaged

foods you'll see different organic labels. "100% Organic" means only organic ingredients are allowed and is the most meaningful label. "Organic" means at least 95 percent of the ingredients are organically produced; the rest can be nonorganic or synthetic ingredients. "Made with Organic Ingredients" means at least 70 percent of ingredients are organic. But remember that junk food made with organic ingredients is still junk food!

Biodynamic
This label is stricter than organic and tougher to find. For example, under the rules, farms that use this label must grow most of their own compost materials. Organics can be grown with fertilizer from conventional farms. You can get more info on biodynamic at demeter-usa.org.



FOOD FIGHT

When you think of organic dairy products, odds are you imagine cows grazing in a pasture. But while the USDA's organic regulations require farmers to give animals grazing time, they don't define exactly how much. And some critics say that two large dairy producers—Horizon Organic and Aurora Organic—are taking advantage of that loophole. Aurora, and retailers that sold its milk under their store labels, including Costco, Target, and Wal-Mart, are facing class-action suits alleging consumer fraud and a failure to adhere to organic standards. "These giant dairies are a betrayal to the values that lead consumers to spend a premium on organic milk," says Mark Kastel, co-founder of The Cornucopia Institute, a farm-policy research group. Ronnie Cummins, national director of the Organic Consumers Association, adds that organic standards are important because cows that graze on grass have fewer illnesses and may produce milk that's higher in omega-3 fatty acids. Both companies told ShopSmart that they were making improvements to give all their cows 120 days of grazing time a year and to ensure that at least 30 percent of the animals' diet is pasture grass. (Aurora's changes are at least in part due to an agreement the company made with the USDA as a result of an agency investigation.) In the meantime, the USDA is considering a rule that would require farmers to give organic dairy cows at least 120 days a year of access to pasture. But critics still aren't convinced. As Kastel told us, if the USDA's proposed rule isn't adopted with all the provisions, enforcement may be impossible.

COW: HOLLY LINDEM; PASTA: WENDELL WEBBER

How to save on organics

Get more for your money at the food store

1 Prioritize your purchases.

If your main concern is eating healthfully, you can save by purchasing organic produce if the conventionally grown version tends to be more contaminated with pesticides. This list includes peaches, apples, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, pears, imported grapes, and sweet bell peppers, celery, lettuce, spinach, and potatoes, according to an analysis of USDA and FDA test results by the Environmental Working Group. (For more info and to download the organization's "Shoppers Guide to Pesticides in Produce," go to www.foodnews.org.) It also pays to buy organic baby food because the conventional versions tend to be made of condensed fruits and vegetables, potentially concentrating pesticide residues, and to buy organic meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy because you reduce your risk of exposure to the agent believed to cause mad cow disease and potential toxins in nonorganic feed.

2 Search the Web for coupons. Many major organic brands, including Stonyfield Farm, Annie's Homegrown, Organic Valley, Earthbound Farm, and Health Valley, offer coupons at their Web sites.

3 Shop at discount stores and comparison shop for specific items.

Many large discount chain stores like Sam's Club, Costco, Wal-Mart, and Target now carry organics and claim that their prices are lower than those of most other retailers. But be sure to check prices on frequently purchased items at different stores to see which retailer sells them for the lowest price.

4 Look for store-brand organics and bulk packaging.

Examples include Whole Foods Market's 365 Organic Everyday Value, Safeway's O Organics, Stop & Shop's/Giant's Nature's Promise, Kroger's Private Selection Organic, Trader Joe's, and others that often cost less than national name brands. Costco, for example, says its private label Kirkland Signature organics offer at least 20 percent savings compared with the leading national brand. (Store-brand milk may not be as good a choice, however. See "Food Fight," at left.)

5 Buy from bulk bins.

You can now find organic rice, flour, beans, granola, nuts, pasta, and peanut butter for less in bulk bins at many grocery stores.

6 Join a food co-op.

They are independent grocery stores that usually offer local and organic foods. Some have a membership fee and may require members to volunteer at the co-op for a few hours each month. Members get a discount when they shop. To find a local co-op, go to www.coopdirectory.org or www.localharvest.org/food-coops.

7 Buy lots of fresh fruits and vegetables in season.

That's when prices are lowest. To see what produce is in season near you, click on your state at www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal. If possible, freeze or preserve produce for later. You may be able to get a discount from local farmers by buying a membership in a community supported agriculture program and sharing it with friends.

What's truly cruelty-free

LOOK FOR THESE LABELS AND SKIP THE REST

The eggs you buy are “cage-free” and your favorite makeup is “cruelty-free.” They may cost more, but it’s nice to think that the folks who produced what you’re eating or rubbing on your face didn’t torture any animals while they were at it.

But do animal-friendly labels actually mean anything? Not always. “Cruelty-free” and “not tested on animals” labels aren’t certified by any independent groups. So shopping for truly cruelty-free products can be tricky.

The good news is that a number of companies say they’re working to improve animal welfare. Burger King recently said it would start buying a small portion of its “liquid egg product” (what, you thought the fast-food chain cracks open actual eggs?) from suppliers that don’t confine hens in wire cages. Smithfield Foods, the largest U.S. pork producer, said it would phase out confining pregnant pigs in metal crates. And Safeway, one of the biggest grocery chains, has launched an animal-welfare policy that includes buying poultry from companies that use humane slaughtering methods and eggs from cage-free producers. (As you’ll read, labels like cage-free don’t go as far as organic, but on a scale this large, it’s a step in the right direction.)

Even better, in part because of a pending European ban, many cosmetic companies are phasing out animal testing. And so many animal tests have already been done, fewer are needed these days.

The next time you find yourself wondering whether that idyllic farm scene on the carton reflects the critter’s real life in any way, check our guide at right.

Food

WORTH IT

✓ Certified Humane Raised & Handled
This label certifies that animals raised for dairy, eggs, pork, lamb, poultry, and beef products were treated in a humane manner. The livestock



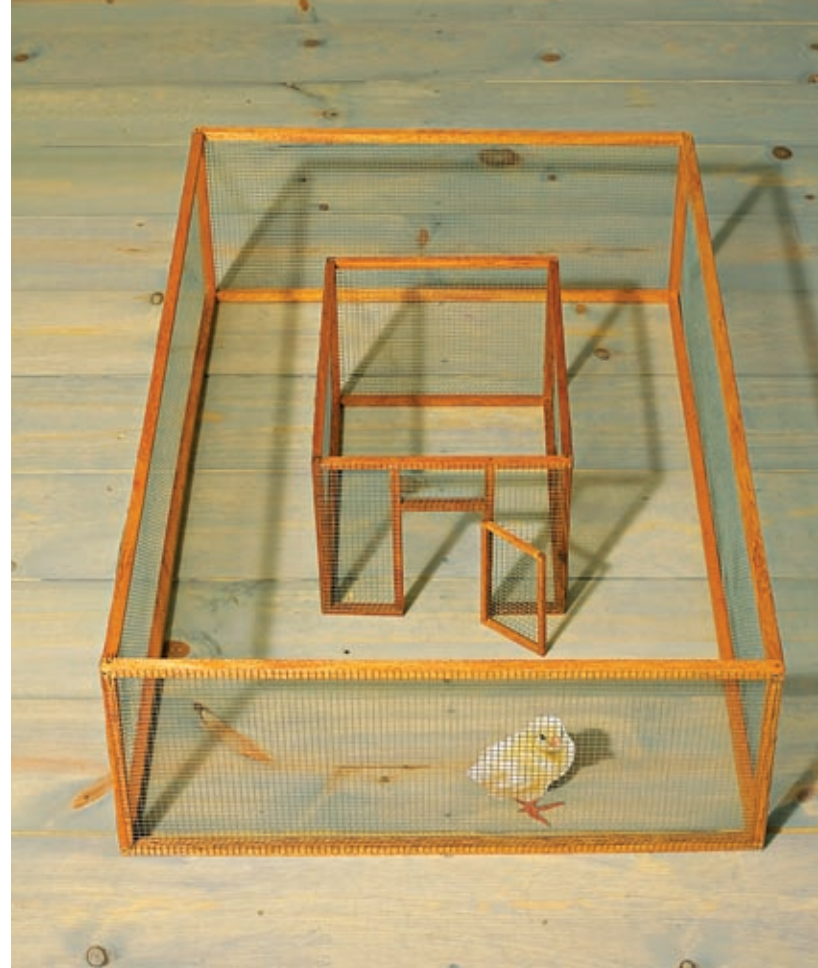
have sufficient space and shelter, gentle handling to minimize stress, and ample access to fresh water. The animals must be able to engage in their natural behavior. Cows must have at least 4 hours of access to pasture or an exercise area each day. These standards for animal welfare are more extensive than those required for organics, although you’ll find products with both labels. Some of the brands that carry this label include Applegate Farms Bacon, Meyer Natural Angus Beef, Murray’s Chicken, and Pete & Gerry’s Organic Eggs. For more info, go to www.certifiedhumane.org.

✓ USDA Organic/Organic
Some organic standards help ensure that animals raised for dairy, eggs, beef, chicken, or pork products are treated humanely. For example,

farmers must accommodate the natural behavior of the livestock and give them organic feed. They must also give them access to the outdoors. And cows must be able to feed in pastures. But there are loopholes because the government hasn’t

adequately defined the requirements, especially for poultry. So when it comes to the humane treatment of animals, organic labels are more meaningful when they’re paired with the Certified Humane stamp. For more info, go to www.ams.usda.gov/nop/consumers/consumerhome.html.

✓ Food Alliance Certified
The Food Alliance certifies a variety of farms that follow sustainable-agriculture practices, including safe and fair conditions for workers. The standards promote humane treatment of animals too. For example, livestock must be handled with care to minimize fear and stress, pregnant pigs cannot be confined in crates, chickens must have access to the outdoors during warm months, and growth hormones and nontherapeutic antibiotics are banned. Some of the brands that carry this label are Country Natural Beef (sold at Whole



Foods Market) and Pure Country Pork. For more info, go to www.foodalliance.org/certification/index.html.

BUYER BEWARE

Free range/Free roaming

The USDA requires that the animals have access to the outdoors, but it doesn’t say for how long and there’s no verification. What’s more, the rules don’t apply to eggs.

Cage-free

It may sound like the chickens were free to peck around in the fresh air, but unless the eggs are labeled Certified Humane, there might be no independent group verifying how the animals are treated. Also, this label doesn’t necessarily mean that the chickens went outdoors. They may have been cooped up inside a screened-in porch or a dirty barn.

Cosmetics and household products

WORTH IT

✓ Leaping Bunny
This label means that a company has pledged not to test finished products or ingredients on animals during any stage of product development, and its suppliers have vouched for their ingredients. The label assures consumers that no new animal testing was done, although ingredients may have been tested on animals in the past. Companies using the logo agree to be audited periodically by an independent assessor. The program is overseen by a coalition of animal protection groups. Leaping Bunny approved brands include The Body Shop, Paul Mitchell,



Tom’s of Maine, Kiss My Face, Seventh Generation, and Method. For more info, go to www.leapingbunny.org. (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals has its own cruelty-free bunny label, which means that a company has signed a statement pledging that it does not test on animals and that its ingredient suppliers don’t test on animals.)

NOT WORTH IT

Cruelty-free/Not tested on animals

No independent group verifies these claims, unless the label specifically says one does, and the meaning may be unclear. For example, the raw ingredients may have been tested on animals even if the final product was not.

HUMANE CHAINS

Some restaurant and supermarket chains are selling foods from animals raised in a humane way or impose animal-care standards on suppliers.

■ BEN & JERRY’S (SCOOP SHOPS AND ICE CREAM BRAND) The company is making the transition to using only eggs from suppliers that are Certified Humane Raised & Handled. Also, it buys milk from a Vermont cooperative that pastures cows during the summer months and doesn’t use growth hormones.

■ WOLFGANG PUCK RESTAURANTS In 2007, these eateries launched a program with the Humane Society of the United States in 14 restaurants and more than 80 Wolfgang Puck Gourmet Express locations to serve eggs only from hens that weren’t cooped up and veal from calves that weren’t raised in small pens. The chain also stopped selling foie gras, which is made from the livers of force-fed geese.

■ WHOLE FOODS MARKET Lamb must be pasture-raised and the eggs come only from chickens that had room to roam. In 2006, the company stopped selling live lobsters because of concerns about animal cruelty.

HOLLY LINDEN