

lifehacker

By [Kevin Purdy](#)

Mar 9, 2010 09:00 AM

The Common Sense Guide to "Organic" and Other Food Labels



Photo by [greenblog](#).

Everywhere you look, food is trying to impress you with how *natural* it is, but the message is vague and often misleading. What does "organic" actually mean? What separates "grass-fed" from "free range"? We're separating real, meaningful labels from eco-hype.

Even if you couldn't care less about the growing media presence and consumer curiosity around food sourcing and handling, it helps to know what you're getting when you're forced to pay more for certain goods.

If it was just one government agency that offered semi-descriptive labels, *a la* the USDA's meat grades, there wouldn't be much to talk about outside the shop talk of butchers. But meat and produce carry a lot of labels and statements these days, ranging from very official imprints to generic terms. Here's the Cliff's Notes version of what you should look for.

The Word "Organic"

Photo by [Tim Psych](#).



This is the biggie among food labels, and one of the most controversial. It's a word that sounds black and white—either it grew up naturally and was brought to you without chemicals, hormones, pesticides, or radiation, or it didn't, you'd think. But under federal law, any product with "organic" anywhere on its packaging or display materials **must contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients.**

To qualify as organic, those ingredients can't contain, or be produced with, any of the following: **chemical, additives, synthetics, pesticides, or genetically engineered substances.** That's the stated law, but, as you might imagine, those criteria can be subject to interpretation, and the USDA's regulation of the "organic" label has [come under questioning](#).

That said, there are different grades of organic labeling in the U.S. Here's how the [Washington Post breaks down the differences](#):

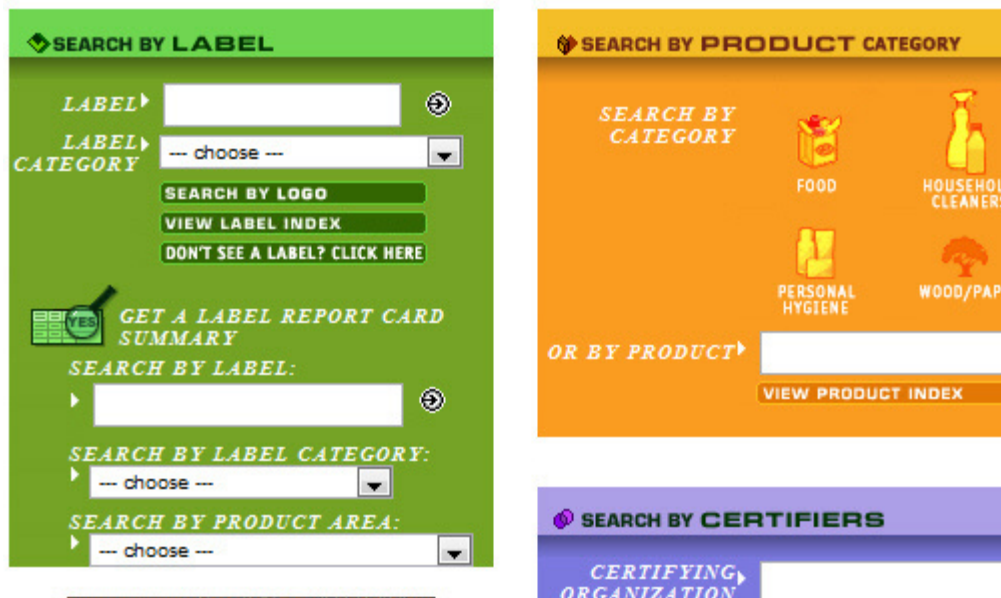
"**100 Percent Organic**" products must show an ingredient list, the name and address of the handler (bottler, distributor, importer, manufacturer, packer, processor) of the finished product, and the name and seal of the organic certifier. These products should contain no chemicals, additives, synthetics, pesticides or genetically engineered substances.

"**USDA Organic**" products must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients. The five percent non-organic ingredients could include additives or synthetics if they are on an approved list. The label must contain a list that identifies the organic, as well as the non-organic, ingredients in the product, and the name of the organic certifier.

"**Made With Organic**" products must contain at least 70 percent organic ingredients. The label must contain a list that identifies the organic, as well as the non-organic, ingredients in the product, along with the name of the organic certifier.

"Natural," "Grass-Fed," And Other Labels

When it comes to concerns and criteria that the USDA and other government or state bodies don't regulate, the path to knowledge gets a lot more twisty.



In my research, the most comprehensive resource I've found to determining what a label really means comes from [Consumer Reports' Eco-Labels verifier](#), a search and index tool that covers a wide variety of labels. From generic labels applied in spirit to state-specific co-op certifications, there's a really good chance anything you're looking for is in there.

But most people don't want to head to the store, write down labels, research them at home, then head back out again with a verified shopping list. So, with Consumer Reports' permission, I've taken one of their [food label report cards](#), and broken down the more widely seen labels into categories. You'll find far more label-specific footnotes, research, and explanations at their [full chart](#), but these labels, as applied to meat and other foods, have been vetted by Consumer Reports' researchers and broken down by how meaningful, verifiable, and free of marketing double-speak they are.

Note: If these label ratings sound harsh, it's because they are. They're based on universal, verified labels, so use your good judgement when all else fails. If a trustworthy local rancher tells you his meat is free of antibiotics, hormones, and was raised naturally in humane conditions, he may be telling the truth, but not have federated labels to prove it. You should still buy that product. All the rest of this is related to larger-market labels you'll find in bigger stores.

Weak or vague labels:

- Antibiotic free
- Free range
- Free roaming
- Hormone free
- Natural
- No chemicals

If the food you purchase carries one of the labels above, keep in mind that most of them don't offer strong verification and sourcing chains, are used with inconsistent criteria, and don't make plain-English standards widely available. In most cases, they were also developed without public or industry input.

Better, but not conflict-free labels:




- No antibiotics administered
- No hormones administered
- Raised without antibiotics

These labels are backed by organizations that have a consistent methodology and clear conditions for their labeling, and make their standards publicly available. In all cases, though, they weren't developed by groups outside the selling chain, and lack for public input and examination.

Consistent, if flawed, labels:

- Grass fed (USDA)
- Salmon Safe

In the "grass fed" case, it's held up by the USDA, but many have criticized the inconsistency of application, and the lack of outside review. Salmon Safe is mostly consistent and has set standards, but was similarly developed "in-house."

Label	Logo	How meaningful is the label?	Is the label verified?	Is the meaning of the label consistent?	Are the label standards publicly available?	Is information about the organization publicly available?	Is the organization free from conflict of interest?
antibiotic free		Not ¹	No	Yes	No	No	No ²
Aurora Certified Organic		Highly for food Not for cosmetics	Yes	No ³	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baystate Organic Certifiers (Previously NOFA-MA Certified Organic)		Highly	Yes	Yes	Yes	No ⁴	Yes
Certified Humane Raised and Handled		Highly Meaningful	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Certifications with clout:

- Aurora Certified Organic
- Certified Humane Raised and Handled
- Certified Organic, Inc.
- Demeter Certified Biodynamic
- Food Alliance (FA)
- Global Organic Alliance (GOA) - Certified Organic
- Guaranteed Organic Certification Agency

- Integrity Certified International
- International Certification Services, Inc.
- NMOCC - Certified Organic
- OneCert
- Quality Assurance International (QAI) - Certified Organic
- Quality Certification Services (QCS)
- USDA - Organic

Consumer Reports considers many of these food labels to lack for consistent meaning, but otherwise finds them certain, controlled, and developed by groups with both separation and public accountability. The USDA "Organic" certification is, as mentioned previously in this post, divided into sub-sets.

Other tools



We've [previously mentioned](#) the [Beef Label Decoder](#) as an interactive tool to help you figure out what the label on your USDA Organic beef label is trying to tell you. If you're interested in finding out more about your milk, [Where Is My Milk From?](#) can answer exactly that question, if you type in the stamped code off the top of your carton.

Not included above are many state-wide and regional certification labels, which are, as previously mentioned, covered more in-depth at Consumer Reports' [big label chart](#) and [search tool](#).

That's our take on slightly simplified food labels. We're not farmers, ecologists, or food inspectors, but we gave it our best. If you've found another guide that's easy to grasp and full of helpful detail, do share the link in the comments.

Send an email to Kevin Purdy, the author of this post, at kevin@lifelife.com.