Food Quality: Is all the hard-to-say stuff on the side label bad for you?

An analysis of the ingredients of a favorite snack...and no, it's not all bad.

By Lisa Chaput

A friend of mine who is a bit of a health nut said that, in general, he would not eat anything that has more than three ingredients listed. Except for maybe potato chips (which has three ingredients), I think he's got it right. The more ingredients a food item has, the more likely it possesses something you just don't need to be putting in your body.

Although here's the rub…processed food can taste wicked good. Not only that, it's usually cheap—like find-the-change-in-your-car cheap. And it's easy—as in open-the-bag or throw-it-in-the-microwave easy. But after a long day's work, there are times that I feel like a blob, and the thought of steaming or baking, as simple as they are, seems as hard as climbing a mountain. On those days, processed food wins out. I'm okay with that every once in a while, but guilt sets in when it happens too often.

I want to eat healthier. I want pure and fresh ingredients. I want wholesome food. I want these things for no other reason than my body reacts better, and overall, I feel better. But having grown up sucking on the teat of industrialized food production, it's hard to wean myself. I LOVE Cheez-Its and Cheddar Chex Mix, even if it makes me feel like crud right after eating it. As I get older and start to notice more aches, tweaks, and pains, I wonder if I could be treating my body better. Probably. Does a lifetime of eating things not meant for consumption do something bad to the body? Perhaps.

Well, curiosity got the best of me the other day. So, I picked one of my favorite snacks, Oat Squares, with way more than three ingredients and looked up many of the items listed on the side panel. There were some interesting, even educational findings.

The List

I skipped over the vitamins, minerals, flours, sugars, and salt and took a closer look at the rest.

Maltodextrin Maltodextrin is a processed vegetable starch used to thicken and extend the shelf life of processed food. It's supposed to be easy for your gut to process, which is great for those trying to bulk up

or endurance athletes trying to get quick fuel. However, it also has a high glycemic index. While okay in small doses, diabetics should take care not to consume too much.

Molasses I love molasses in my cookies, and it might be the reason I appreciate this cereal so much. But I didn't know exactly how it was produced…until now!

Sugar and molasses go hand in hand. After sugar beets or canes are harvested, they are crushed, and their juices are extracted. Then, the liquid is boiled down until sugar crystals form. After the sugar crystals are removed, you're left with a thick syrup called original or light molasses. From there, it can go through the process again, but this time, you're left with dark molasses. Do it *one more time*, and you have blackstrap molasses.

Some people like to take blackstrap molasses as a supplement because it contains vitamins and minerals. However, the sugar intake pretty much cancels out the benefits. However, given it does contain vitamins and minerals, if you can substitute it for sugar, it might make whatever you are cooking or baking a little more …healthy? Hmmm…maybe *well-rounded*.

Sodium Bicarbonate One of our favorite household items since you can cook and clean with it. More often referred to as baking soda, this item's purpose was probably to add a little plump to the oat biscuits upon acting with the acid in the molasses.

Where does it come from, though? Turns out, from nahcolite and trona. Nahcolite is a natural source of sodium bicarbonate, usually found at the bases of dried-up lake beds. Trona is another naturally occurring compound that, after being mined, is refined to make soda ash, then again to make sodium bicarbonate. 25% of the world's sodium bicarbonate comes from trona, mainly mined in Wyoming. You can also get sodium bicarbonate through the Solvay Process, which involves ammonia, carbon dioxide, limestone, and saltwater.

Malted Barley Extract When I think of malt, I think of that yummy creamy, nutty flavor in a malted milkshake, Whoppers, or Maltesers. Malt is derived from cereal grain that is germinated and then heated to stop the growing process. In baking, it is used for its flavor, color, and to act as the sugar needed to feed the yeast. It is also an essential ingredient for making beer.

Mixed Tocopherols At first, I was expecting to read that these were paint thinners or something, but to my surprise, it's vitamin E! Bring on the mixed tocopherols!!! But not too much since they are fat-soluble (meaning they have a tendency to linger in your fatty tissue). It does say that it is to preserve freshness, which means it's being used as a natural alternative to synthetic preservatives like BHT, BHA, and TBHQ

Caramel Color So, it turns out that caramel coloring is used in a TON of food. According to the DDW Colour House (now known as Givaudon Sense Colour), it's in 1 of 20 products at your supermarket. It can come from heating some types of sugar, starch from corn or wheat, malt syrup from barley, or even molasses.

Before, I would have taken it to mean that they were just adding a type of caramelized sugar. Well, yes and no. It's a little like caramelized sugar but without the sweetness and with additional salt or acid used for the processing.

While the coloring has the green light to be added to food products in several countries, some think it could be a carcinogen. Consumer Reports took a closer look and found some interesting readings from popular sodas. It makes me wonder what some of our favorite colas would taste like if they used legit caramelized table sugar instead of highly processed sugar and color additives.

Turmeric Oleoresin This one was amazing to me. Oleoresin is a naturally occurring oil-resin substance that's been treated with a solvent like acetone, ethanol, or a hydrocarbon, for the purpose of extraction. The product is similar to an essential oil (usually extracted through steam) but slightly less intense, although more intense than the naturally occurring spice/aroma. After the extraction, the solvent is separated from the oleoresin, although there are allowances for residuals.

Sometimes oleoresins are used for just their color, sometimes just their flavor, and sometimes both. From what I read, the flavor profile available with an oleoresin is much more comparable to the original spice/aroma than the essential oil, making it a preferred product (in addition to being cheaper to process than essential oils). I can also see money being saved in transportation costs of the oleoresin or essential

oil over the original spice/aroma. But the waste-not-want-not, natural-is-usually-better, person in me wants to know what they do with the leftovers (solvent and spice fibers) when they are done.

Annatto Extract Derived from the annatto seed of the achiote tree, it reminds me of the beach roses on Cape Cod with their rose hips, only the pod of the achiote tree is spike-covered, and the leaves are smoother. The seeds range from bright yellow to deep orange. At some point, I had thought this coloring came from beetles, but I guess I must have confused it with carmine or cochineal (which are coloring agents derived from bugs).

***Side Note: In Ugly Delicious Season 1: Episode 2, Tacos, you can see annatto seed harvested for authentic Mexican dishes. This show is incredible…it's like Anthony Bourdain, but when I'm done watching, I feel like I was tricked into learning something….thank you David Chang and friends. Plus, David also hails from Falls Church, VA, so bonus points to him for that.

Natural Flavor Reading into this was a little irritating because it was just another reminder that you can't take things at face value. I mean, I knew that natural flavor was a catch-all, but why can't they say "plant derivative" or "animal derivative"? Also, chemical preservatives can be used to enhance the "natural flavors." I guess it's better than artificial flavors that are entirely derived from chemicals, though.

Conclusion

"I'm going to stop eating everything on this label!" is not something I would say. However, I didn't see any red flags while looking up these ingredients. Sure, anything eaten to excess will cause some problems, but it isn't too bad in little bits. I still have a ton of questions. But those questions can wait for another post.

Sites Used

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