



What Does It Mean? Food Labels for the Smart Shopper

Choosing food that cultivates personal and environmental health requires a commitment to being responsible for what you eat, where you purchase it, and how it was produced. Regardless of your income or economic status, there are opportunities to vote with your money each time you purchase food.

Here is a list of terms that you may see on produce and products as you shop or go to markets. This list is intended to help you understand what the label means and how the product was grown, raised or produced so that you can make an informed choice. These definitions do not speak to the quality of produce or a product.

No Antibiotics/Antibiotic Free. No antibiotics were administered to the animal during its lifetime. If an animal becomes sick, it will be taken out of the herd and treated but it will not be sold with this label. The certified organic label insures no antibiotics were used during production.

Beyond Organic. When the US government officially approved standards for organic food (the National Organic Program, NOP), a number of farmers dropped their organic certification because they felt that the NOP definition of organic compromised or did not live up to their organic principles or practices. Some of these farmers, most of whom were certified before the NOP, started to refer to themselves and their products as “beyond organic.” In fact, many of these farmers raise their animals and crops using methods that are stricter than the USDA NOP organic standards.

Biodynamic. Biodynamic farming is an approach based on the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). In addition to organic practices such as crop rotation and composting, biodynamic farmers rely on special plant, animal and mineral preparations and the rhythmic influences of the sun, moon, planets and stars to foster a sustainable and productive environment. A farm may be certified biodynamic by the Demeter Association.

Cage Free. Poultry for meat or eggs are raised without cages so greater natural movement and interaction with others in the flock is possible. “Cage free” does not imply access to the outdoors.

Certified Naturally Grown. A method of farmer to farmer certification with requirements intended to be the same as the National Organic Program (NOP). The Certified Naturally Grown organization is online at cngfarming.org

Conventional. Refers to standard agricultural practices that are widespread in the industry. This may include the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, antibiotics, hormones and other agribusiness approaches. Conventional farming in the U.S. may also include the use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO's). Similar terms may include “industrial” or “non-organic”.

Ecologically Grown. The term implies that the grower has not used synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, and may have engaged in other sustainable practices, but it has no official meaning.

Free Range. According to the USDA, producers must demonstrate to the Agency that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside in order to be labeled “free range”. This does not mean that the animals actually are outdoors at any time in their lives.

Fresh Milk/Raw Milk. Milk that has not been pasteurized or homogenized. In Michigan it is not legal to sell raw milk, but “cowshares” are permitted.

GMO-Free. The product was produced without the use of GMOs (genetically-modified organisms).

Grain-Fed. The animal was raised on a diet of grain; the grain may be supplemented with animal byproducts and other matter. **Grass-Fed.** The animals are raised on pasture and eat only grasses and nothing else. **Grass Fed/Grain Supplemented.** Animals are raised on pasture and eat grasses, but their feed may be supplemented with grains (e.g. during the winter months). **Grain Finished.** Cattle who are raised on pasture but transitioned to a diet of pure grain before slaughter. Grain makes the meat fattier and creates the taste most people are currently accustomed to in the U.S.

Heirloom Varieties. Heirloom varieties, also called heritage, farmers’, traditional, or landrace varieties, have been developed by farmers over a period of years by selecting for reproduction the plants or animals which perform best in the local environment.

Humane. If an animal product is labeled “humane,” it implies that the animals were treated with compassion and allowed to engage in natural behaviors. There are four organizations in the U.S. which confer “humane” certifications; all have differing standards for the term.

Local. There is no exact definition of “local” for produce. Some refer to the “100 mile diet” which implies the food came from within 100 miles. Local may mean within the region, state, or county. For an accurate meaning it is important to ask the producer or vendor what they mean when this term is used.

Naturally Grown/All Natural. USDA guidelines state that “natural” meat and poultry can only undergo minimal processing and cannot contain artificial colors, artificial flavors, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients. The claim “natural” is otherwise unregulated. Produce labeled “Certified Naturally Grown” must meet the standards of the Certified Naturally Grown organization (see above).

Organic. In order to be labeled “organic,” a product must have been raised and handled by operations which have been certified by a USDA-approved organic certifying agency. Organic certification requires that farmers and handlers document their processes and get inspected every year. Organic on-site inspections account for every component of the operation, including, but not limited to, seed sources, soil conditions, crop health, weed and pest management, water systems, inputs, contamination and commingling risks and prevention, and record-keeping.

No-Spray or Pesticide Free. This usually means that no synthetic pesticides were used to grow the product. This definition might also include not using seed treated with pesticides or not treating the soil with synthetic pesticides prior to planting. Pesticide-free is not the same as organic; certain natural pesticides are approved for organic use, and the term organic covers much more than just pesticide use.

Sustainable. A product can be considered sustainable if its production enables the resources from which it was made to continue to be available for future generations. A sustainable product can thus be created repeatedly without generating negative environmental effects, without causing waste products to accumulate as pollution, and without compromising the wellbeing of workers or communities.

Vegan. Foods with this label contain no animal products of any kind. For crop production systems, vegan means no use of animal manure or animal nutrient sources such as bloodmeal or bonemeal.

Vine-ripened/Tree-ripened. These terms are applied to fruit that has been allowed to ripen on the vine or tree. Many fruits that are shipped long distances are picked while still unripe, and then sometimes treated with ethylene gas to “ripen” and soften them.