



decoding food labels



Shopping for healthy, sustainably-grown food can be challenging. Use this quick guide to make sense of the labels you're likely to see on your food.

[decoding food labels]

It can be overwhelming to try to shop sustainability, responsibly, and affordably. There are many different certifications and claims to keep track of. This guide can help you sort through the options, whether you are doing personal shopping or ordering food or drink for your office.

At a Glance

To make it easier to determine the reliability of these labels, we've created a quick system:

Consistently reliable



Somewhat reliable



Not reliable/not consistent



This categorization is **not** an indication of the quality of a product or brand, merely of the predictability and reliability of the standards on which a particular logo or claim is based.

This is not a comprehensive guide: you may encounter labels beyond those listed here. To research additional labels and logos, see the last page of this guide for additional resources.

[decoding food labels]



● 100% Vegetarian Diet; Vegetarian Fed

- Not certified by an independent organization
- Intended to indicate that livestock or poultry were not fed any animal by-products
- Does not mean animals were raised on pasture



● Bird Friendly

- Certified by Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center of the National Zoo
- Signifies coffee grown beneath a tree canopy that provides quality habitat for birds



● Cage Free

- Not highly regulated by Food Safety Inspection Service of USDA
- Intended to indicate that eggs come from chickens that were not confined in cages
- Does not mean animals were raised outdoors or in adequate space



● Certified Humane Raised and Handled

- Certified by Humane Farm Animal Care, an independent nonprofit
- Requires that animals are allowed to engage in natural behaviors, have sufficient space, shelter, and gentle handling, and have ample fresh water and healthy diet without added antibiotics or hormones

Tip: If there is a uniform logo – that is, if you see the same logo regardless of brand – then it's likely a reliable claim.

[decoding food labels]



● Certified Organic

- Certified by annual USDA-approved independent inspections
- Indicates food not grown using synthetic fertilizers, chemicals, or sewage sludge and does not contain genetically modified organisms or be irradiated
- For meat, indicates animals fed only with organically grown feed without animal byproducts and no use of hormones or antibiotics



● Demeter Certified Biodynamic

- Certified by Demeter International
- Indicates products grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers, genetic engineering, other requirements of the organic label
- For meat, indicates no animal by-products were used in livestock feed
- Emphasis on biodiversity, soil husbandry, view of a farm as a "holistic organism"



● Dolphin-Safe Tuna

- Certified by Earth Island Institute
- Indicates no intentional chasing or netting of dolphins, no use of drift gill nets, no accidental killing or serious injury, and involvement of independent observers



● Fair Trade Certified

- Certified by TransFair USA
- Ensures that farmers receive fair prices and workers receive fair wages; enables more direct access to global market
- Based on principles of fair prices, fair labor conditions, direct trade, community development, environmental sustainability



[decoding food labels]



● Food Alliance Certified

- Certified for sustainable agriculture practices and social responsibility
- Indicates employees have safe and fair working conditions, animals are treated humanely, no use of hormones or GMOs
- Emphasizes reduction of pesticide use and conservation of soil, water, and wildlife habitat
- Continual improvement necessary



● Free Range/Free Roaming

- Not regulated for beef or eggs; not verified by independent third party
- USDA requirement is 5 minutes of outdoor time



● Grain-Fed

- No uniform certification or labeling
- Suggests animals were fed diet of grain
- Does not guarantee that feed did not include animal byproducts, other matter



● Grass-Fed

- Only reliable with “USDA Process Verified” shield
- Indicates that ruminant animal (cow or lamb) has been raised on diet consisting fully of grasses, hay, forage

Tip: Talk to the vendors at your farmers' market about their growing practices and labor standards. Small farmers may not pay for certification but may still meet these standards.

[decoding food labels]



● Healthy Grown

- Certified by Protected Harvest
- Indicates potatoes grown with reduced pesticides through Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques
- Growers required to participate in ecosystem conservation



● **Hormone Free, No Added Hormones**

- Not verified by independent organization *unless explicitly stated*
- USDA already bans use of added hormones in hogs and poultry
- rBGH-free or RBST-free: product does not contain synthetic growth hormones given to cows to increase milk production



● Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

- Certified by independent verification
- Meets MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing
- Relates to condition of fish stocks, impact of fishery on marine environment, and fishery management systems



● **Natural or All Natural**

- Not verified by independent organization
- For meat and poultry, intended to indicate no artificial ingredients or added color and minimal processing
- Product packaging should indicate what is meant by 'natural'
- USDA can enforce use of term in all food products *except* meat



[decoding food labels]



● No Antibiotics Administered

- Not verified by independent organization *unless explicitly stated*
- Intended to indicate that animal was raised without low-level or therapeutic doses of antibiotics



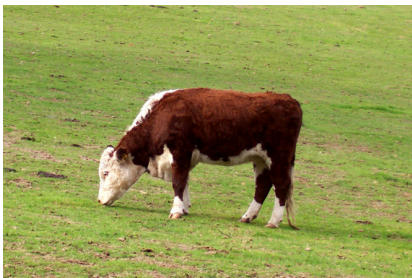
● No Chemicals Added

- Not verified by any reliable certification system
- Does not include antibiotics



● Northeast Eco Apple Project

- Certified by third party inspector
- Indicates apples grown with minimal use of toxic pesticides
- Requires attention to soil and water conservation, pesticide use, grower education, food safety and product quality, energy conservation, recycling, and constant self-improvement



● Pasture-Raised

- Intended to indicate cattle raised outdoors with access to pasture and allowed to engage in natural behaviors
- No standards, so label is somewhat subjective

Tip: Buying local products may allow you to get a personal look at the farm conditions.

[decoding food labels]



● Rainforest Alliance Certified

- Certified annually by independent inspector
- Indicates that crops have been grown sustainably and workers were treated justly
- Based on standards of Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN)
- Farms audited annually and with surprise visits



● Salmon Safe

- Certified by independent nonprofit
- Indicates that farm, vineyard, municipal park, or campus employs management practices that protect streams and rivers
- For farms, six categories of certification, including water use management, erosion control, chemical use management, etc.
- Limited to West Coast and British Columbia



● Seafood Safe

- Certified by EcoFish and tested by independent companies
- Intended to inform consumers of amount of fish that is safe to consume at particular contaminant level (mercury + PCBs)
- Actual labeled fish not tested, but samples of same species from same location and of same size are tested by EDF



● Wild-Caught

- Somewhat reliably labeled
- Intended to indicate fish from seas, rivers, and other natural bodies of water
- Ongoing debate about sustainability and health benefits



Helpful Resources

Want to do further research for yourself? Here are some websites to get you started.

[These Labels Are So Confusing!](#) – Sustainable Table

[Debunking the Labels](#) – Sustainable Food Trust

[What do food labels really mean?](#) – Twin Oaks Farm

[Organic vs. Natural vs. Cage Free](#) – Business Insider

[Food Labeling Survey](#) – Consumer Reports

[Greener Choices Eco-Labels Center](#) – Consumer Reports

[Transforming Fisheries](#) – World Wildlife Foundation

[Seafood Guide](#) – Food and Water Watch

[Sustainable Agriculture Standard](#) – Sustainable Agriculture Network

[Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms](#) – USDA

Updated August 2016