

Understanding Food Marketing Terms

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Each year brings a host of new food products and trendy terms and claims to describe them. Too often, however, blurry definitions and vague usage can lead to confusion. Learn which food marketing phrases can help you make healthier choices — and which terms won't make much of a difference to your diet.

"Natural"

Currently, no formal definition for the use of "natural" on food labels has been issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, "natural" claims have become common on new foods and beverages.

According to their website, "Although the FDA has not engaged in rulemaking to establish a formal definition for the term 'natural,' we do have a longstanding policy concerning the use of 'natural' in human food labeling. The FDA has considered the term 'natural' to mean that nothing artificial or synthetic (including all color additives regardless of source) has been included in, or has been added to, a food that would not normally be expected to be in that food. However, this policy was not intended to address food production methods, such as the use of pesticides, nor did it explicitly address food processing or manufacturing methods, such as thermal technologies, pasteurization, or irradiation. The FDA also did not consider whether the term 'natural' should describe any nutritional or other health benefit."

Due to growing consumer inquiry about how "natural" can or should be used on food labels, the FDA opened a public comment period in 2016.

USDA allows the use of the term "natural" to be used in meat and poultry labeling on products that contain no artificial ingredients or added color. The product also must be only minimally processed. The label must explain the use of the term natural — for example: "no added coloring, minimally processed."

"Processed" and "Unprocessed"

These terms are frequently misunderstood. Many people think of "processed" as unhealthy packaged foods with empty calories and loads of additives, and "unprocessed" as foods that are not canned, frozen or packaged. Neither of

these beliefs is entirely correct.

According to the USDA, "processed" refers to food that has undergone a "change of character." Some examples include raw nuts (unprocessed) vs. roasted nuts (processed); edamame (unprocessed) vs. tofu (processed); a head of spinach (unprocessed) vs. cut, pre-washed spinach (processed).

"Local"

The local food movement refers to buying food that is grown close to where you live. This movement is connected to a broader philosophy of environmental sustainability and supporting the local economy. Still, even "local" can have a variety of nuances depending upon whom you ask. The term "locovore" is used to describe someone who eats food grown or produced locally.

"Whole"

There is no regulatory definition of whole foods. "Whole foods" generally refer to foods that are not processed or refined and do not have any added ingredients. By most definitions, whole foods include fresh produce, dairy, whole grains, meat and fish; meaning any food that appears in its most pure form with minimal processing.

"Organic"

Of all these terms, "organic" has the most specific criteria and legal meaning. As defined by the USDA, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones. Organic plant foods are produced without using most conventional pesticides, fertilizers made with synthetic ingredients or sewage sludge, bioengineering or ionizing radiation. A government-approved certifier must inspect the farm to ensure these standards are met. In addition to organic farming, there are USDA standards for organic handling and processing.

There are three levels of organic claims for food:

- *100-Percent Organic*: Products that are completely organic or made of only organic ingredients qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- *Organic*: Products in which at least 95 percent of its ingredients are organic qualify for this claim and a USDA Organic seal.
- *Made with Organic Ingredients*: These are food products in which at least 70 percent of ingredients are certified organic. The USDA organic seal cannot be used but "made with organic ingredients" may appear on its packaging.

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