

GMO, MY GOD! EATING SHOULD BE A JOYFUL RITUAL, NOT A PANIC-ATTACK-INDUCING NIGHTMARE. READ THIS, THEN EAT THE PIE.

GET SO

WHEN DID



SCARY?

RECENTLY, AS I scavenged my fridge for a healthy bite, I spotted some deli meat. Not just any deli meat—hormone-, antibiotic-, nitrate-, gluten-free chicken breast. Munching on my holier-than-thou snack, I noticed a note on the package: “Our chickens are raised in a stress-free environment.”

I’m glad someone is. Things were simpler a decade ago, when the big concern was whether 80-calorie yogurt actually tasted like cheesecake. Now headlines warn that berries are pesticide-laced cancer bombs and we can’t eat an egg without wondering if its mom was on penicillin. Dietary qualms aren’t about quantity but quality: how produce is grown, where poultry lives, what cows graze on.

Is our worry warranted? “We’ve put ourselves in food jail with these rules,” observes Rebecca Scritchfield, RD, founder of Capitol Nutrition Group. Confusion reigns at the grocery store, with more than 75 nutrition claims plastering food, many of them pure marketing. “A ‘natural’ product can have artificial ingredients,” says Urvashi Rangan, PhD, of the *Consumer Reports* Food Safety and Sustainability Center. “Skinny” doesn’t mean low-fat or low-cal—it means nothing.”

So what’s healthy becomes a personal choice. But how do you choose when the government says GMOs are no biggie but the Food Babe begs to differ? We’ve decoded the most abstruse labels to help you figure out what you *can* eat.

FOOD

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN PHOTOGRAPHED BY JEFFREY WESTBROOK

HERE'S THE DEAL WITH

GMOS

THE HYPE No food does the walk of shame like a GMO. Surveys show that more than half of U.S. consumers express concern about genetically modified organisms, but many have no idea what that means. “Too often, if I ask clients what GMO stands for or why they’re against them, they don’t know,” says Scritchfield. (Mini-tutorial: A GMO is a living organism whose genetic material has been manipulated in a lab for a desired outcome—corn that is pesticide-resistant or apples that brown slowly.) The U.S. government considers them safe, yet the EU, Australia, and Japan have restricted or banned them. Between Chipotle’s new anti-GMO stance and Bill Gates claiming they could help solve world

hunger, it’s hard to know whom to believe.

THE SCIENCE

Genetic-engineering advocates credit the technique with boosting crop yield and lowering the need for pesticide—a score for hungry nations and the planet. Environmental plant biologist Clint Springer, PhD, explains that “we’ve been engineering crops for millennia through crossbreeding. This is a more precise way to create organisms with more benefits.” Genetic engineering has little to do with a food’s healthfulness but speaks to breeding. The World Health Organization, American Medical Association, and American Association for the Advancement of Science all deem GMOs safe. In November, the

FDA even okayed the first GMO animal for human consumption: a salmon whose DNA has been tweaked to help it grow faster.

On the other side, anti-GMOers feel that we shouldn’t play cut-and-paste with DNA and genetically engineered foods should be labeled as such. “The federal government hasn’t mandated that GMOs be proven safe,” Rangan says. Besides claiming that GMOs could potentially introduce allergens, opponents point out that the use of certain herbicides has created superweeds. Studies on the environmental impact are split. In a study on genetically engineered soybeans, the USDA found that the use of herbicides has about doubled since the introduction of GMOs, yet a British study shows overall pesticide use is down since the mid-’90s, thanks to GMOs.

No large-scale studies have yet shown that



UNSURE WHETHER THAT APPLE IS ORGANIC OR NOT? CHECK THE LITTLE STICKER WITH THE PLU CODE ON IT. DOES IT START WITH 9? BOOM—ORGANIC.

GMOs are harmful to humans. One 2012 study on rats drew scary headlines, but it was retracted, so you’re likely worrying for naught. If you’re set on avoiding them, it can be tricky and expensive. Buying local is one solution: Small farmers often employ organic practices, including shunning GMOs. Also, while packaged foods may use GMO sugar beets, corn, canola, and soybeans, most unprocessed whole foods are GMO-free. And the fact that whole foods are good for you is, happily, not up for debate.

HERE'S THE DEAL WITH

NATURAL

The Hype You know things are serious when Taco Bell and Pizza Hut give artificial ingredients the boot and even Kraft Mac & Cheese ditches its iconic neon orange synthetic color. And with good reason: Nearly 60 percent of customers look for the word *natural* on packaging when shopping, according to a *Consumer Reports* survey. Of those seeking this label, two-thirds think it means a food has no artificial ingredients, pesticides, or GMOs.

The Science You know that scene in *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere asks Julia Roberts what her name is and she says, “What do you want it to be?” A *natural* label is kinda like that.

Regulators generally consider the term to mean a lack of artificial ingredients, including preservatives. But they have made no judgment on whether these foods are better for you. Nor does the label indicate how an animal was treated or what it was fed, which could include antibiotics or GMO feed.

“We assume *natural* equals *healthy*,” Scritchfield says. “Snake venom is natural. That doesn’t mean it’s good for you.” Instead of trolling for *natural*, look at the ingredients. Opt for more positive stuff (fiber, protein, vitamins) than negative (sugar, trans fat) or plain confusing (BHT, potassium benzoate). As nutritionist Wendy Bazilian, DrPH, notes, “A frosted toaster pastry with organic cane sugar, red beet dye, and real strawberry bits is still a toaster pastry.”

ORGANIC

THE HYPE There’s nothing like a fridge full of organic berries, wild salmon, and cage-free eggs to make you feel virtuous. Americans wolfed down a record \$39.1 billion worth of organic food in 2014—up 11.3 percent from 2013. And the biggest buy-in is coming from millennials, nearly half of whom choose organic for at least 50 percent of their purchases and feel better about themselves when they do so. “Consumers have a perception that organic farmers are lavishing love on every blueberry and that those berries will ensure you never get sick,” says Nathanael Johnson, author of *All Natural*.

THE SCIENCE Unlike the *natural* label, *organic* has substance. In a nutshell, produce is considered organic if it was grown without conventional pesticides or synthetic or sewage sludge-based fertilizer. (Yep, that last one’s for real.) Packaged foods must contain at least 95 percent certified organic ingredients and cannot be processed using industrial solvents, irradiation, or genetic engineering. As for organic meat, animals are fed organic feed, cannot receive antibiotics or hormones, and must have natural-ish living conditions, like the ability to graze.

Eating organic sounds more appetizing, but is it more nutritious? When Stanford researchers pored over 237 studies comparing organic and conventional foods, their results showed no difference in nutrition or

health risks. But a 2014 *British Journal of Nutrition* review did find greater overall antioxidant levels, meaning “if you regularly eat organic produce, it’s like getting the antioxidants of a fifth serving of fruits and veggies for every four,” explains study coauthor Charles Benbrook, PhD. His study also found lower pesticide levels in organic foods. “Some pesticides are known to cause or promote cancer growth, impair the immune system, and raise the risk of obesity, diabetes, and dementia,” he adds.

As for meat and dairy, limiting the use of antibiotics on animals is a great idea, Johnson says. “The drugs allow germs to evolve. We’re running out of ways to kill the resulting superbugs.” Drug-resistant UTIs have been linked to factory-farmed chickens.

The possible health risks—and ickiness—of pesticides and antibiotics are real, but so are the known benefits of fruits, vegetables, and lean protein. Buy organic when possible, especially for meat, dairy, and the produce most likely to sop up chemicals: apples, grapes, nectarines, peaches, strawberries, sweet bell peppers, celery, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, imported snap peas, and spinach. But don’t shun produce just because it’s not organic. It’s been estimated that higher pesticide consumption contributes to 10 cancer diagnoses per year, while upping fruit and veg consumption may prevent 20,000 cases of the big C.

HERE'S THE DEAL WITH

GLUTEN-FREE

The Hype Your sister is orgasming over how much energy she has since she stopped eating gluten, and [insert celeb here] swears it keeps her in her size-2 skinnies. They’re part of the one-third of Americans who aim for low or no gluten (a protein substance found in wheat, barley, and rye), according to market research firm The NDP Group. The problem: “Folks think that gluten causes weight gain or gluten-free means low-carb, but that’s not true,” says Bazilian. “Many gluten-free products, like cookies and breads, have extra fat or sugar to make up for the mouthfeel and flavor lost when gluten is removed.” Gluten-free often costs more too: A four-pack of Udi’s gluten-free bagels costs around \$6; a six-pack of Thomas’s bagels, about \$2.50. And because consumers will pony up, more products are crying *gluten-free*, even if the food hasn’t

contained gluten for years (like some rice cereals) or ever (popcorn, we’re looking at you).

The Science For the 1 percent of Americans with celiac disease—an autoimmune disorder triggered when you eat gluten, causing non-Tinder-friendly symptoms like bloating, pain, chronic diarrhea, and constipation—ditching the protein is a must. If you’re one of the 18 million who are sensitive but not allergic to gluten, you may want to lay low too. But if you’re looking to drop pounds, you’re better off on a whole-foods diet, filling your cart with items from the grocery store’s perimeter: produce, chicken, fish, lean meat, and yogurt... all naturally gluten-free. In fact, Bazilian says it’s this back-to-basics, cleaned-up eating that likely causes the cheerleader-like high that people rave about when going G-free. ■

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