

How to create clean labels without compromise

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Consumers are increasingly looking for natural, minimally processed food, which is driving many food manufacturers to create products containing as few ingredients as possible. But when removing just one ingredient can upset the delicate eco-system of a product, how can they create 'clean labels' without compromising on safety and taste?

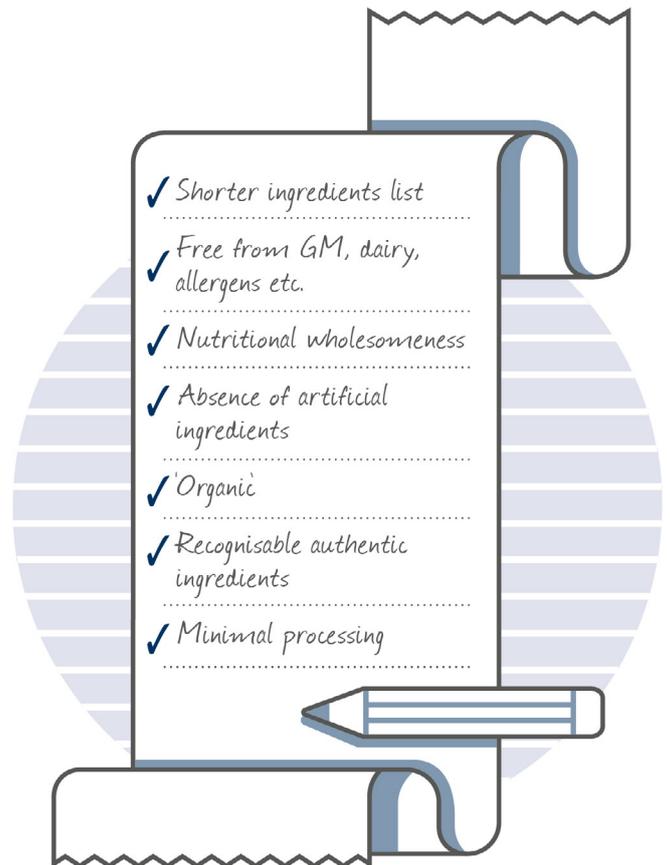
What is clean label?

Many consumers perceive lightly processed products as healthier, so they search for 'clean labels'. However, the term 'clean label' can mean different things to different people. It can be taken to mean a label that contains natural ingredients, is 'free-from' certain things (e.g. allergens), doesn't have artificial additives or preservatives, or contains recognisable, readily available ingredients.

Why is creating clean labels so challenging?

When trying to create clean label products, manufacturers will typically look to reduce the overall number of ingredients in the product and remove any ingredients that could be perceived by consumers to be artificial. But it's often not as simple as swapping an artificial ingredient for a 'natural' ingredient.

Ingredients all serve a function within a product, and they may interact in ways that the manufacturers themselves aren't even aware of. This means that moving to clean labels can be a complex process, as replacing or removing a single ingredient can have a negative impact on the taste, safety and shelf life of your product. It can also be time-consuming, and the longer it takes to find the ideal formula, the more opportunity there is for competitors to gain market share.



What's the best way to move to cleaner labels?

Creating products with clean labels isn't always easy, but having an established process in place can make the process as pain-free as possible. Here are the key ingredients for a smooth journey to a cleaner label:

1

Understand the blueprint

Firstly, manufacturers need to get a clear picture of their product's 'blueprint'. This is essentially a map that details the state of the ingredients, how they're distributed throughout the product and which ingredients are creating the product's properties.

Armed with this knowledge from the outset, product development teams can go forward with a full understanding of how their ingredients interact with each other and accurately predict how ingredient changes will affect the product.

2

Test for safety and shelf life

A key concern when removing or replacing ingredients is how it will affect the product's safety or shelf-life – even a small increase in water activity or a slightly more open crumb structure can make a significant difference to the product.

Testing is vital to ensure the safety and stability of the modified product, and there are a range of tools that manufacturers can use to verify safety. They should carry out an initial risk assessment of any new ingredients or sources of ingredients and the process to flag any obvious areas for attention. They can then use mathematical modelling to explore how a new formulation will affect the product, and ongoing shelf-life testing to observe how the product changes over time.

At Leatherhead, we also recommend 'challenge tests' for all new or modified products. This involves deliberately contaminating the product with relevant microorganisms to identify any food safety issues that may arise in the new formulation. While models and assessments are useful, challenge tests can reveal safety issues that would otherwise go under the radar.

3

Understand the blueprint

The process of moving to a clean label is complex, but it can be made easier if product development, safety and regulatory teams work together throughout. If the product development team doesn't share new formulations with the safety team from the beginning of the process, for example, valuable time could be wasted developing an unsafe product.

By encouraging cross-department collaboration, manufacturers can make well-rounded decisions about how to deliver clean labels quickly and safely.

Clean labels without compromise

If you're looking to move to clean labels to ensure your products remain competitive, testing will ensure that you're not compromising on quality or safety.

At Leatherhead, we can help you throughout the process of cleaning your labels, from developing a scientific blueprint of your product to challenge testing new formulations. To find out more about how we can help your organisation, call us on 01372 376761 or email help@leatherheadfood.com.

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