

Consumer IQ

Don't Fall for These 6 Common Food Fakes

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If you saw a designer handbag selling for \$30 at a sidewalk stall, it probably wouldn't pass your sniff test as the real deal.

But some of the items on your grocery list may not be such screaming deals, either.

“From escolar sold as white tuna to honey blended with high fructose corn syrup or fungicide infused orange juice, we are beginning to learn that food is not always what it seems,” says Anthony Fassio, CEO of New York's Natural Gourmet Institute.

Sometimes, it's just a bad deal. But in some cases, it can be hazardous to your health.

There's no easy path to avoiding misleading and fake foods. Often, it comes down to doing some research and asking a lot of questions.

Does that coconut oil seem way too cheap compared with other options on the shelf, or the price you last paid elsewhere? Check the label to see if it's blended, and read reviews online.

It also helps to buy from trusted vendors. "Buy as close to the source as possible," says Fassio. Visit the farmers market, and check out butcher shops and fish mongers if possible, he adds.

Be cautious buying from offbeat sources—a flea market isn't the place to be picking up discounted olive oil in brand-name bottles, and the corner bodega may not be a better bet for alcohol than a liquor store.

Six of the fakes to watch out for:

Oils

According to a 2012 *Journal of Food Sciences* study, olive oil is the food most likely to be faked.

Buyers might not be getting the "extra virgin" promised, picking up an oil that hails from a different region than expected, or getting something that's made from something other than olives.

Consumers have also reported concerns about expensive coconuts oils (may be adulterated with other oils) and truffle-infused oils (usually chemical flavoring, rather than real truffles.)

Read labels carefully: Experts say it can help to look for details like a recent harvest date and a quality seal (such as a protected designation of origin seal, if it was imported from Europe).

Buzzwords

"Keep an eye out for buzzwords such as: 'natural,' 'local,' 'farm to table,' and 'fresh,'" Fassio says. "While many wonderful restaurants and markets may use these terms in their truest sense, there is little to no regulation around their use."

The food in question may be none of those things.

The Natural Resources Defense Council has a [good guide](#) to which certifications and claims mean something, and which don't, and why.

Coffee

Buy whole beans and grind them at home, yourself.

The Food Fraud Database has found instances of pre-ground coffee being adulterated with items including potato flour, soybeans, barley, and starch, as well as non-food items such as twigs and parchment.

Steak

Is that steak filet mignon? Maybe, maybe not.

Meat producers may use a substance called transglutaminase (called “meat glue” in media reports) to stick meat pieces together to form a whole cut.

“The deception is so bad, it takes an experienced butcher to be able to tell the difference,” says Christina Major, owner of Crystal Holistic Health Consulting.

If you’re at a store, check the label. The USDA requires product labels to note transglutaminase or TG enzyme on the ingredient list, and in the product name with a descriptor like “formed.”

Fish

A study from ocean advocacy group Oceana released earlier this year found that one-third of seafood is mislabeled.

Snapper and tuna were most likely to be identified incorrectly. (Worse, most of the “tuna,” was actually escolar, which can cause digestive issues and doctors explicitly recommend pregnant women avoid.)

Shoppers may benefit from picking a whole, more easily identifiable fish instead of fillets (many supermarkets will clean it for you for a small charge), or sticking with varieties that are easier to identify.

In the Oceana study, salmon was most likely to be correctly labeled.

Spices

Saffron was the fourth-most adulterated food in the 2012 Journal of Food Sciences study.

Vanilla extract, turmeric, star anise and paprika are among the other spices that reportedly are commonly mislabeled or adulterated.

It’s one purchase where you might be better off [skipping the bulk bins](#) — or at least, asking the store about the spices’ provenance.

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