

NUTRITION & FOODSERVICE

# EDGE

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## Salt & Sodium

Shaking Off Old Habits



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**CLEAN LABELS**  
How They Benefit Your  
Food Service



# What Clean Labels Can Do for Your Operation

**C**leaning up a foodservice operation involves more than just good sanitation. Consumer demand for healthier foods and desire for food ingredient transparency are driving foodservice and retail operations to take a new approach to offer “cleaner” menu items and be more open about the ingredients they are using or not using.

“The transition to clean-label menu items is not a passing fad or trend, it’s a movement,” said Gilles Stassart, a corporate chef with General Mills Foodservice who works closely with healthcare facilities. “It’s also a time of great opportunity for foodservice professionals to give consumers what they are looking for, as well as serve products and menu items they can feel better about serving.”

He adds that the movement is in the beginning stages so there is still plenty of time for operations to explore ways to clean up their menus—whether it’s eliminating additives, focusing on a simplified list of real ingredients, or starting an open dialogue with patrons.

## EVOLVING CONSUMER PREFERENCES

Clean-label products and clean eating are more important than ever to consumers. More than 60 percent of Americans recently stated that they base food purchases on the absence of artificial flavors and colors, according to Nielsen, while 80 percent of foodservice operators agree that healthier bakery items







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add up to increased sales, as noted by Technomic Away from Home.

While “clean label” has become a part of the food industry’s vernacular, not everyone has the same definition or understanding of this movement. Some consumers may view clean eating as healthy eating while others view it as products that are free of chemicals, preservatives, and other additives. Within food service, Stassart says the definition of clean typically encompasses items with natural flavor and without artificial colors.

“Essentially, a clean label is about real food and getting back to the basics,” said Stassart. “It entails a short, simple ingredient list with ingredients that are easy to pronounce and easy to recognize, without any chemicals, artificial preservatives, colors, or flavors. These are the ingredients you would find in many home kitchens.”

When products have clean-label ingredients, consumers find it easier to eat clean and avoid various ingredients from artificial flavors to MSG. Some consumers have food allergies or sensitivities while others simply prefer transparency and simple ingredients. According to

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Innova Market Insights, more than 90 percent of customers believe food with recognizable ingredients is better and healthier, further driving demand for such products everywhere from grocery shelves to restaurants to away-from-home foodservice settings.

### COMING CLEAN

Within the foodservice industry, clean labels go beyond packaged goods to back-of-house products—everything from frozen baked goods to baking mixes and staple ingredients used to make signature menu items. More operators are asking for “no/no” versions of products, referencing no artificial flavors and no artificial colors.

Some of the most prominent visible efforts toward clean menus are found in national restaurant chains. For example, fast-casual Panera is getting in on the action, recently noting that “100% of our food is 100% clean,” including the U.S. food menu and Panera at Home grocery products, following a two-year effort to remove all additives from its many ingredients. Chipotle was one of the first restaurants in its category to eliminate genetically modified organisms (GMOs), while

Subway also recently removed artificial flavors and colors and serves only chicken raised without antibiotics. McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut—among a growing list of others—are also focusing on cleaner options for customers.

Clearly, consumers want to know what they are eating and the industry is responding.

### TIPS FOR CLEANING UP BAKED GOODS

Industry experts believe that clean labels aren't a trend, but a long-lasting movement that is here to stay. As more consumers expect clean food, operators must devise ways to prepare consistent products that still taste great. A key area of opportunity and a good place to start is with baked items.

As foodservice bakery sales continue to grow, offering clean-label options supports consumers' desire for improved health and wellness while delivering good food that meets customer needs and cravings. The following tips can help operators clean up and clean out artificial ingredients and flavors:

- **Seek out easy substitutes for natural flavors**—such as buttermilk and concentrated dairy products for artificial butter or baking powder for aluminum—and natural colors, such as turmeric, annatto, and dehydrated beets.
- **Manage potential mold by reducing the pH of your dough;** you can experiment with different natural flavors. Likewise, when you invest in good cooling and air filtration systems, you will automatically reduce mold formation.
- **Turn to enzymes to enhance flour quality,** increase water absorption, and replace artificial flavors.
- **Make a sponge to hydrate your dough the natural way.** The latest equipment for dough-handling can also decrease dependence on dough conditioners.
- **Use more yeast,** which can replace artificial ingredients and still reduce mixing time; customers often praise the flavor of yeast and it's versatile for various baking needs.

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Stassart adds that foodservice operations should not be afraid to lean on their manufacturer or distributor partners for help in creating cleaner menus. They are likely to have additional resources and be willing to help identify clean label products and develop recipes that will taste great and keep menus exciting.

In 2017, General Mills Foodservice announced that it would help bakeries, restaurants, and foodservice operations meet consumer demand for baked goods made with simpler ingredients, introducing a portfolio of baking products with no artificial flavors or colors from artificial sources.

“Removing artificial flavors and colors is a reflection of our commitment to focusing on more recognizable ingredients in our products,” said Stassart.

Ultimately, when you pay close attention to what your customers want, what natural substitutes are readily available, and what short- and long-term changes you can make in your operation, it’s possible to affordably and efficiently implement clean label.

## SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

If your operation is transitioning to more clean-label options, you have a wonderful opportunity to spread the good word. Patrons are interested in what you are doing and why, and it is important to communicate any changes, goals, and progress.

To increase awareness about your clean-label efforts, consider the following ideas:

- Create marketing materials that spotlight the clean-label products and ingredients you are using; you can devise a graph or chart that highlights the growth in clean label/natural/organic usage over time. Publicize your efforts online and through social media.
- List ingredients in regular menu items to alert customers that you are offering clean and natural options in your foodservice operation.
- Share clean recipes you have developed to highlight natural ingredients and flavors and remind patrons why you are making changes.
- Highlight individuals and organizations you work with and order from that offer clean-label products.

Clean labels offer a clean slate for the industry to return to its roots, providing natural, simple products with ingredients that are easy to pronounce and enjoy. While making the switch to clean labels entails an investment of time and money, it can pay long-lasting dividends in terms of customer appreciation. **E**

