

What's in My Food?

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Few people know that the food coloring listed as cochineal extract comes from female beetles. Food activists want to spread the word.

When you dig into a strawberry Yoplait yogurt, take a moment to contemplate where the beautiful pink color comes from. Strawberries? Think again. It comes from crushed bugs. Specifically, from the female cochineal beetles and their eggs. And it's not just yogurt. The bugs are also used to give red coloring to Hershey Good & Plenty candies, Tropicana grapefruit juice, and other common foods.

You won't find "crushed bugs" on the list of ingredients for any of these foods, however. Companies have a bit of latitude in describing exactly what they put in our food. Many larger companies, such as General Mills, the manufacturer of Yoplait and Pepsi, the maker of Tropicana, identify the dye in their products as either carmine, or cochineal extract. Still, many companies simply list "artificial color" on their ingredients list without giving any details.

Inside Food

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Food activists are trying to change disclosure requirements. The Food & Drug Administration has received numerous complaints over the issue and is now in the process of considering a proposal to require color additives like the cochineal extract to be disclosed on the labels of all foods that use them. "Hopefully we'll see something by the end of the year," says Michael Jacobson, executive director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a food advocacy group in Washington, D. C.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS. Jacobson says that consumers want to know what they're eating. Some are allergic to bug extract; others are vegetarians. "The food product should indicate that it comes from insects so that vegetarians at least can avoid the product," he says.

Food Poll

Carmine may be the least of food activists' worries. It is known to cause allergic reactions in just a small percentage of the population. Food producers sometimes add much more dangerous chemical additives to make their products look attractive (see BusinessWeek.com, 3/27/06,

"Hershey: A Sweeter Bid").

Indeed, who would think that chicken, eggs, and salmon are often artificially enhanced to look more appetizing to consumers? The plump, juicy chicken sitting on the supermarket shelf is likely to have been fed canthaxanthin, a pigment added to chicken feed to enhance poultry's yellow color and make it look palatable. And egg-laying hens are also given a dye along with their feed, making egg yolks vary in color from light yellow all the way to bright orange.

IN THE PINK. Farmers can have their pick from a color chart that goes from the numbers 1 to 15, coinciding with colors from yellow to red. The yellow color comes from xanthophyll and carotenoids in the feed absorbed through the intestine, metabolized, and deposited in the egg yolk. In an article published last year, R. Scott Beyer, a poultry specialist from the Kansas State University, recommended different levels of xanthophylls, depending on what color of yolk is desired. He says 23 mg of xanthophyll per pound of feed results in a "medium orange" color.

Supermarket Secrets



Fred Prouser, Reuters

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- Sneaky Supermarket Tricks

The fresh, farm-raised salmon that shoppers buy also get their orange-red hue from eating the chemicals astaxanthin and canthaxanthin. Wild salmon are pink because they eat shrimp-like creatures called krill. But to achieve the same pink color, farmed salmon need chemicals, which are mixed with their feed. In the past couple of years, the European Union significantly reduced the level of such dyes that can be fed to salmon because of concerns that the dyes, at high levels, can affect people's eyesight.

Two years ago, in the U.S., Seattle law firm Smith & Lowney filed two class actions against grocers Kroger and Safeway in Washington and California, contending that they should disclose that their salmon are dyed pink. Both lawsuits got thrown out of court. However, Knoll Lowney, a partner at the law firm, says that the lawsuits raised enough public awareness that many grocers voluntarily use "color added" labels to their salmon.

Still, Lowney says that such dyes are totally unnecessary. "This is a growing problem because the food companies are using more artificial means to enhance the appearance of the product and make it appear like something that it is not," he says. A walk down the grocery aisle for processed food is an eye opener—the bacon and ham get their red tint from sodium ascorbate, an antioxidant and color stabilizer, and the Betty Crocker icing gets its bright white color not from natural cream and egg whites but from titanium dioxide, a mineral that is also used in house

paints. Betty Crocker manufacturer General Mills didn't return phone calls seeking comment.