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HEADLINE: Real **food** should have a real label

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BODY:

During a nostalgic moment not long ago, I opened a can of beef ravioli, stuff I devoured as a kid.

I couldn't wait to taste it, to revert, for a moment, to my childhood days. I took a bite and - yuck! - spat it out.

It was just plain nasty.

I checked out the label, trying to understand why, and saw a list of ingredients that seemed like something out of Dr. Evil's laboratory.

What were monosodium glutamate, caramel coloring, modified corn starch and enzyme modified cheese doing in there?

Something sinister happened to our food during the workplace revolution.

Food manufacturers started selling convenience foods that resembled real meals.

Heat and eat was their mantra. Working moms everywhere started snatching up frozen TV dinners, canned dinners and 'add water and stir' meals.

But it's food that's so overprocessed, much of its original nutrients are gone. In its place are salt and fat - stuff that tastes good but later leaves you feeling lethargic and hungry.

Supermarkets are filled with that stuff. The consumer backlash only went so far.

The federal government doesn't force food manufacturers to make their foods healthier. They just require labels that tell consumers there is zero nutritional value.

So those of us looking for healthy food that doesn't contain synthetic additives, unnecessary preservatives and other chemicals shop at health food supermarkets, such as Whole Foods.

We buy organic apples because pesticides scare us. We prefer free-range chicken and hormone-free beef - the kind of food our parents used to eat when they were little.

We read labels. And we depend on the federal government to figure out what's unhealthy and either ban it from the marketplace or require full disclosure on the labels.

It's a given that we should know what we're ingesting. Right?

Well that may not be the case with beef, pork and chicken coming from cloned animals.

That's right. Cloned animal meat may be coming to a supermarket near you.

The federal Food and Drug Administration is planning to determine by next spring whether meat from cloned animals should be allowed to be sold for consumption.

Last week, an FDA advisory committee released a report saying that after reviewing numerous studies - mostly of cloned cattle - it found no significant differences between cloned animals and naturally bred ones.

'The current weight of evidence suggests that there are no biological reasons, either based on underlying scientific assumptions or empirical studies, to indicate that consumption of edible products from clones

of cattle, pigs, sheep or goats poses a greater risk than consumption of those products from their nonclone counterparts.'

Nonclone counterparts? I guess that's science talk for real animals.

Lester Crawford, deputy commissioner of the FDA, said the agency hopes to do more research, gather public opinion and then decide whether to allow meat and milk of cloned animals to be sold.

But if it does, the food will not likely carry a label that says, for instance, 'This chicken breast came from a cloned chicken.'

There won't be a clone section and real-animal section. Crawford said the labels won't be necessary if scientists conclude that it's virtually the same.

That's scary news to me. I'm no scientist, but I don't need a study to tell me that cloned chicken is not the same as the real thing. It's not the same as in-vitro fertilization.

Remember Dolly the sheep, the first mammal cloned from a cell, not an embryo? When she was born in 1996, she was a marvel.

But soon enough scientists found out that she had arthritis and lung problems and showed other signs of rapid aging. She was put to death at age 6.

Since then, scientists have cloned mice, horse, pigs, you name it.

At Denver's 2002 stock show, two cloned Black Angus calves were on display. And from the outside, who can tell the difference?

I'm fine with cloning animals in the name of science. But in the wealthiest nation in the world, there's no need to breed animals for us to eat when they can be reproduced naturally.

Even if the FDA decides, after exhaustive studies, that it's OK to sell chicken breast, ham and pork chops that came from cloned animals, they should require a huge label on the package so those of us who want

to bypass it - and I have to believe that includes most of us - can move on to the real thing.

Otherwise, a whole lot of us are going to become vegetarians.

Cindy Rodriguez's column appears Mondays and Fridays. She can be contacted at crodriguez@denverpost.com.

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