Dear Alice,

When reading the labels of food containers, it will often list “natural flavors” as an ingredient. My question is what exactly is a "natural flavor"? Wouldn't the product already have that flavor if it's natural?

Thanks,

Puzzled Foodie

Answer

Dear Puzzled Foodie,

The term “natural flavors” on a food label can seem like a redundancy, but with this particular question the devil is in the details. The Food and Drug Administration has an official definition for the label — a natural flavor is any substance meant to contribute to flavor that is derived from anything natural. This is distinguished from the definition of “artificial flavors” in that artificial flavors are derived from synthetic substances. Both artificial and natural flavors are actually combinations of chemicals that are created through a complicated process of physical separation methods and then added to processed food. So, the words “natural flavors” on food products don't refer to the naturally occurring flavors that come from the foods, nor do they imply a natural process in creating the flavors; they simply mean that the primary raw materials that created the flavor compounds were found in nature.

When making a natural flavor, a flavorist must begin with the natural, raw material and then add processing aids in order to increase the density of aromatic chemicals. The raw material generally doesn't have a high enough concentration of these chemicals on its own to provide the desired flavor. The finished flavor compound can contain up to 250 chemically identified substances, including processing aids, preservatives, and other artificial substances, none of which the companies are required to disclose to consumers. Not only are natural flavors not entirely natural, but sometimes artificial flavors are actually naturally derived. For example, a natural raspberry flavor might be used to flavor strawberry ice cream, in which case it would be labeled as an artificial flavor, despite it having originated from a natural source. However,
because the raspberry flavor wasn't used to create something that tasted like strawberry, it's deemed artificial. Had it been used to flavor a raspberry flavored ice cream, it would be labeled a natural flavor. In these instances, not only is the source from which it's derived considered but also the flavor it's trying to create.

Ultimately, to avoid chemical or unnatural components in food, steering clear of processed food may be in order. This would be the case regardless of whether a food item contained natural or artificial flavors. All processed food items contain additives and preservatives. Additives and preservatives serve a variety of purposes, but the primary reason is that without preservatives, mass produced food would spoil. At the end of the day, you can't be certain that the processed food you buy comes from all natural ingredients, but it’s up to you to decide what you feel comfortable eating and what you'd rather leave on the shelf.

Hope you found this information tasty!

Alice!

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