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Supermarkets Say: Please Don't Buy the Crap We Sell



By Marty Kaplan

I couldn't believe my eyes.

I was in a Minneapolis branch of Byerly's, an upscale grocery chain in Minnesota. Scanning the aisles for a small extravagance for my dinner hosts, I noticed that the shelf labels included not just the price-per-unit, which I'm used to, but little blue and white linked hexagons marked on a scale of 1 to 100 — a “NuVal” score.

NuVal scores don't tip you off to a bargain. They tell you how good or bad a food is for your health.

Yeah, right. The idea that a food store would admit — would explicitly declare, on the spot, as your hand is reaching for it — that a product it's selling is nutritionally crappy: that violates every principle of Marketing 101, not to mention Ayn Rand 101.

This is different from the labels that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has required since 1990. Those are well-intentioned marvels of confusion, containing so much information (are you getting your minimum daily requirement of magnesium?), so much disinformation (calculating calories per serving, when a serving is half the amount a runway waif would eat), so much incomprehensible information (I forget — is tripotassium phosphate good or bad for you?) that you can get an anxiety attack trying to figure out which granola will nourish you and which will kill you.

But NuVal scores make that simple, and sometimes shocking.

Cocoa Puffs, for example, gets a NuVal score of 26, but so does Life (“you don't have to be a grown-up to benefit from the whole grain inside”), and Kashi Strawberry Fields Cereal (“plenty of whole grain goodness”) gets a 10, same as Cap'n Crunch.

An apple gets a 96, which you might expect. But unsweetened applesauce gets a 29, apple juice gets a 15 and Mott's Original Applesauce (“a great tasting snack that's actually good for you”) gets a 4.

Nabisco Nilla Wafers (“simple goodness”) get a 6, and Keebler Townhouse Bistro Multi-Grain Crackers (multi-grain! surely good for you, no?) get a 3 (no).

You'd expect fresh broccoli to get 100, as does Birds Eye Cooked Winter Squash. Grapefruits are 99, and sweet potatoes are 96. But Vlasic Old Fashioned Sauerkraut gets a 4.

Skim milk comes in at 91, 1 percent milk at 91 and 2 percent at 55. Capri Sun gets a 1. So does Odwalla Pomegranate Limeade with 20 percent juice. Who would buy products like these if they actually knew what poison — I mean, um, empty calories — they amount to, and if they had manifestly better alternatives an arm's reach away?

The NuVal numbers are the brainchild of David L. Katz, M.D., MPH, an adjunct associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine. A dozen doctors and nutritionists, funded by the nonprofit Griffin Hospital in Derby, Conn., developed the scoring system, based on 30 factors including vitamins, fiber, salt, sugar, fat quality, protein quality, glycemic load, energy density and calories. From the public health evidence about those factors, they constructed an algorithm that processes the data into a single number. As new food science research is published, and as products are reformulated by their manufacturers, the algorithm and the individual scores are updated. (If that's happened to any of the products I've mentioned, I'll be glad to revise the numbers online.)

It's a miracle that some 30 retail food chains are adopting the scores. You won't find them at Whole Foods or Trader Joe's, and from the locations page of the NuVal website it looks like the only chain in my neck of the woods — Kroger, which in Los Angeles owns Ralphs and Food4Less — is running a "pilot program in select areas" (Kentucky, apparently). But Lunds and Byerley's, which use NuVal, are venerable markets in Minnesota, as is King Cullen on Long Island, N.Y.; grocers in the NuVal fold aren't just a bunch of crunchy hippies.

As you might imagine, there's been pushback. Ocean Spray, whose Light Cranberry Juice Cocktail gets a 2, says NuVal doesn't reflect their product's urinary tract health benefits. Sara Lee, whose Ball Park hotdogs get a 7, says other Ball Park products score higher. General Mills complains that details of the algorithm aren't public, as does the National Consumers League, which turns out to be an astroturf front for the likes of Monsanto, Bristol Myers Squibb, the Chemical Specialties Manufacturers Association and the National Meat Association. And according to Dr. David Katz, the NuVal founder, the algorithm "has been described in detail in peer-reviewed publications accessible to all. It has been made available in its entirety to research groups throughout the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.; to federal agencies in the U.S.; to the Institute of Medicine; and to private entities that have requested such access."

I'm no food puritan. My culinary patrimony consists of schmaltz, gribines and kishka. (Don't ask.) I believe that the joylessness caused by renouncing "bad" foods — and the guilt that's caused by consuming them — conceivably undoes the good that's done by substituting celery for Oreos. I know that adding eye-popping 1-to-100 scores to grocery price tags won't cut down on gargantuan portion sizes; or make meals more mindful occasions; or alert us to our complicity with corporate farming; or prevent the processed food industry from addicting us to salt, sugar and fat; or get our butts off the couch and start moving. But giving consumers a no-brainer tool while they're standing in the supermarket aisle is surely a more promising way to stop the slow-motion suicide we call the American way of eating than declaring March to be National Nutrition Month.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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