

ECONOMY FOODS

(Paper prepared by Eva Lewis, Consumer Panel Member, January 1999)

Economy Products

I have noticed that more and more Economy foods lines are appearing on our supermarket shelves. When economy products first arrived I was under the general impression that you paid less because there is no fancy packaging and that was the only difference. In other words they were pretty much the same the same as the supermarket branded products. They look like a good idea, as there is quite a big price difference: Economy Bleach 15p against 60p and around 37p for Economy Jif against around 97p for the real thing. Now there are lots of food lines.

Economy Foods

There are now many 'economy' versions of common foods sold under the supermarkets' own brands names. These are naturally very attractive to people on lower incomes. But are they really the same foods with plain packaging or could they be higher in fat, salt, sugar, water and any other ingredients that may not be as nutritious as the normal branded product?

Nowadays more and more economy lines are arriving on the shelves; we have Economy:

Frozen Chicken	Frosted Flakes	Canned vegetables
Sausages	Corn Flakes	Canned fruit
Burgers	Muesli	Canned soups
Ham	Milk	Pasta
Bacon	Orange Juice	Rice Pudding
Fish fingers	Bread	Pizza (tomato & cheese)
Meat Pies	Low fat spread	Marmalade
Fresh vegetables	Lard	Lemonade
Baked Beans	Flour	

Public Understanding

I have talked to lots of ordinary people about this and they seem to be as confused as I am. The general understanding is that Economy carrots are the misshapen ones that people don't want on their dinner plates and this was confirmed by a manager in Sainsbury's and the same seems to apply to the tinned tomatoes and this looks like a good idea. He said the difference between the Sainsburys tinned tomatoes and the economy ones is that the Sainsburys ones were whole plum tomatoes and that the Economy ones were not so perfect but then I wondered about the chopped tomatoes.

I am particularly concerned about Economy milk and frozen chicken. The milk is UHT but as an ordinary consumer I don't understand what this means and neither does anyone else I have spoken to.

Environmental Health Interest

The Consumer Panel Secretariat received a letter from Alan French, the Principle Environmental Health Officer for Environmental and Consumer Services at the London Borough of Greenwich, which I enclose, about every survey they have commissioned on economy foods. I have been to see him and we discussed the fact that some Economy lines could be less nutritious then the branded names. The survey is looking at:

Frozen chips Burgers Frozen chicken Baked beans	Sausages Low fat spread. Ham
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I asked Mr French if he considered the word Economy to be misleading to consumers. He said yes, if they don't have the same nutritional value as the branded products. He also said that:

- If there is extra water in Economy ham then you are paying for more water.
- If the Economy peas are bigger then it is OK because even if they are not as sweet or tasty as the small ones the still have the same nutritional value.
- If meat products use Mechanically Recovered Meat then the taste is bland and there is a need to use additives. This would mean the poorer consumers are not getting the benefits.
- If the Low Fat Spread has more water in it there is a need for more emulsifiers

Public Information

Neither Alan French nor I have seen any leaflets in supermarkets explaining Economy foods. No information is provided on the J Sainsbury website.

Looking at some of the food labels I saw that:

- Sainsburys meat pies have 'beef stock (with flavouring emulsifier)'
- Economy Meat pies have 'salt, sodium, bicarbonate, emulsifiers, water'
- Sainsburys tinned tomatoes have 'new potatoes, water and salt'
- Economy tinned potatoes have 'water, salt, antioxidant, absorbic acid and mint flavouring. I understand that absorbic acid vitamin C and antioxidants are good for you but I don't understand why there is a difference.

I spoke to Alan French on 12 May to get an update on the survey. He said that Economy Foods do look like there could be excess of fat, sugar, and salt. Either to bulk them up with cheap ingredients, or to enhance the taste. On top of all that, all the additives are for some particular

reason, such as longer shelf life by using more preservatives, or when using MRM, more colouring and flavourings (emulsifiers).

Concerns

Could the word 'Economy' be misleading to consumers?

Could the products be labelled in a way to explain the difference in ingredients?

Could consumers have some information from the supermarkets about the Economy brands?

Are there any leaflets planned to explain Economy Foods?

Do Economy Foods benefit the consumer other than with packaging?

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