

What's on your plate? : Be Food Smart website supplies answers to consumers

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Astaxanthin. Calcium stearoyl lactylate. Butylated hydroxytoluene.

They're not words that exactly roll off the tongue, but they're ingredients that surely could wind up there — making their way to your digestive system and being absorbed by your body. If you read them on a package in the grocery aisle, would you know whether to put it in your cart or keep shopping?

To help consumers make informed decisions, longtime label readers Dina Clapinski and her brother, Jonas Dalidd, launched Be Food Smart (www.befoodsmart.com), an online database, this fall.

The searchable website summarizes what's known — or at least what they've been able to find — about food additives, chemicals, food colorings, sweeteners and preservatives commonly found in processed foods.

Entries describe in layperson terms what the ingredient is, what it's used for and what kinds of food contain it, variant names, if it's banned in other countries, possible health effects, allergy information and links to related studies.

So, visitors will learn that astaxanthin, for example, might be beneficial. It's the pink or reddish pigment in wild salmon flesh and has been used as a food supplement.

But they may want to steer clear of butylated hydroxytoluene, which is a petroleum-derived preservative that's caused cancer and birth defects in some animal studies.

The sibling founders grew up in a health-conscious, vegetarian household in Ojai.

"Mom made pretty much everything from scratch, and both our parents are excellent cupboard chefs. They can make pretty much anything from what's in the cupboards," Mrs. Clapinski, 33, told the News-Press in the dining room of her Santa Barbara home.

From an early age, they were taught to be what she calls a "flipper": Someone who flips over a package to get a look at the ingredients label.

While out grocery shopping as youngsters, "our mom would say, 'You can have any cereals you want but it can't have sugar,' " she remembered, smiling at her brother.

"Which meant pretty much everything!" said Mr. Dalidd, 31 — or everything that would appeal to a 6-year-old.

"But she was including us in the process of picking foods, reading ingredient labels, from a very young age," Mrs. Clapinski said. "It surprises me how many people don't at all look at ingredient labels."

The siblings got the idea to start Be Food Smart about a year ago while Mr. Dalidd was visiting on vacation from Orange County, where he lives and works for an engineering software design firm.

"We were in the car talking about websites that should exist but don't," recalled Mrs. Clapinski, and that's when her brother hit on the food ingredients database.

After a lapse in healthy eating habits in his college years, when he'd subsisted on dorm food, he'd gradually started eating better again and reading food labels, particularly after settling into domestic life with his wife, Shabina, in 2004.



What are you really eating? Be Food Smart, a searchable website, supplies information to consumers about ingredients commonly found in processed foods.

NEWS-PRESS PHOTO ILLUSTRATION



Dina Clapinski, left, and Jonas Dalidd, shown here in Mrs. Clapinski's living room, founded Be Food Smart to educate consumers.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS



An entry on the Be Food Smart website shows a D grade for high fructose corn syrup and lists information about the sweetener.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

"I immediately became frustrated at not knowing half the ingredients on some products, which probably should have been an indication to stay away from them," Mr. Dalidd said later in an e-mail.

And since Mrs. Clapinski had having her daughter, Linnea, with her husband Mike two and a half years ago, she, too, found herself paying even more attention to food labels and could see its value .

Each had tried independently in the past to look up ingredients on the Web, but had found only a hodgepodge of information. There's little on the topic that's easily accessible to consumers, the siblings say. Some websites have are overly technical chemical databases, which aren't of much use to the non-scientist; others are simply short lists of synthetic ingredients commonly found in foods.

There have "definitely been many times when I've looked up food and ingredients (on the Web) and was surprised something like this didn't exist," said Mrs. Clapinski.

"There's Wikipedia, but you don't know who updated it last, and sometimes it's very technical and there's very little info. It doesn't tell you a whole lot about whether you should actually be eating it or not."

While they'd only tossed around concepts, Mrs. Clapinski decided to pursue the project after she learned the Santa Barbara branch of Bargain Network, where she was working in human resources, was closing for good last year. "I remember driving on Hollister and calling (my brother) up and saying, 'Hey, I'm doing the food ingredient website. Are you in?' " she recalled. "And he's like, 'I'm in!' That's literally how it happened. A week or two later, he drove up here and started looking for domains."

Mr. Dalidd designed and programmed the website. And his sister set to work researching and populating the database with content, while also being a stay-at-home mom.

On a recent visit, the site had 174 ingredients, from acesulfame potassium, a potentially harmful crystalline sweetener, to zingerone, a possibly beneficial synthetic flavoring made from ginger.

In the No. 1 spot of searched terms: high-fructose corn syrup, which has gotten a bad rap in recent years, with some claiming the ubiquitous sweetener contributes to rising rates of obesity and diabetes.

Over the past year, "our main focus has been building the database because there are obviously thousands and thousands of additives that are in food, so we're focusing on the most common ones," Mrs. Clapinski said. The site launched in September and they hope to add several hundred more ingredients by the end of the month.

Neither sibling has formally studied nutrition, diet or chemistry. Mrs. Clapinski earned a bachelor's degree in communication from UCSB; Mr. Dalidd studied aerospace engineering at UC Irvine.

So while writing the entries, Mrs. Clapinski combs through a range of reference books; government websites, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, United States Department of Agriculture, as well as food agencies in Canada and the European Union; and peer-reviewed scientific studies from online database PubMed and other sources to come up with a research-based consensus.

"What we try to do is present the facts. The opinion piece of it is that we give each ingredient a grade," she said. "With health effects, we include animal studies that say something may cause tumors or be cancerous, but we're not making any direct claims."

As for the opinion piece, each ingredient is rated on a scale from A to F, with A being beneficial, B being potentially beneficial, C being somewhat neutral, D being possibly harmful, F being clearly harmful. They suggest consumers avoid anything below a C. Others that they haven't individually studied yet or that have inconclusive findings are given a question mark rating.

"We try to always include resources to other papers and stuff so they don't have to just take our word for it, they can go look at the resources and references," added Mr. Dalidd.

Be Food Smart includes a blog on health and food topics and an education section with a glossary so, for instance, you can find out just what an "anti-foaming agent" or a "sequestrant" is. It also describes how to comparison shop by looking at labels, using examples like maple syrup and kidney beans.

While the siblings have funded the project themselves, they do accept advertising on the site, so long as it doesn't present a conflict of interest, they say.

Mrs. Clapinski considered herself food-savvy before, but she was surprised by some of her findings while working on the database, learning that some ingredients she thought were harmful were actually benign and vice versa.

For instance, canola oil, also called rapeseed oil, is "genetically engineered and highly processed," she said. "They've marketed it as this is the healthy oil that you should be eating, lower in saturated fat, that it's got more of the good stuff and not of the bad stuff. But in my research I didn't think that it was all that. It's hard, though, because to find an alternative, it's not easy."

In general, it's taught her not to take things for granted. "A lot of people, they buy the same product year after year after year, not realizing, number one, that manufacturers can change ingredients at any time and they do very frequently. They'll replace one thing for another and it often will be whatever's cheaper and oftentimes that's not the better ingredient," she said.

"And number two is when was the last time they actually looked at the ingredients to begin with?"

It can be depressing to find out your favorite food is no longer as good for you as you thought, admitted Mrs. Clapinski.

But "neither one of us is extremist," she said. "We eat, like, Halloween candy. I let my daughter have Snickers and M&M'S and whatever else. (It's a) little harder though, knowing what I know now — all those colorings ... I didn't have as much appreciation for food colorings as I did after researching them. It's really not a good thing. And kids are marketed so much to things that have food coloring, and they're the ones who are affected most by it."

Be Food Smart gives FD&C colors in general a D rating, listing possible health effects from asthma and hyperactivity to birth defects in animals. They also give ratings and descriptions for individual colors.

The siblings have tried to make the site friendly to smartphones, and they'd eventually like to develop apps and create additional search options, so that people can make better decisions while they're out shopping.

They realize their site will tend to attract visitors who are already pretty health-conscious.

"But it would be wonderful if people stumbled upon us and that created an awareness they didn't already have," said Mrs. Clapinski.