

Sometime ago I wrote about package labels and what they tell you. Things have changed and more food packages have useful information on them. You can find out lots of handy things.

Product dates are still confusing. There are several ways of dating a product. They mostly mean something different.

The biggest problem stems from the fact very few products are required to be dated by Federal law. That's right. Only baby formula and some baby foods are required to have dates of any kind. All the others are voluntary unless required by State law.

So in Alabama the law requires a store or restaurant to tell you the country of origin of the catfish they sell but not when they got it or when to use it. I sort of like that last one best.

Many of the label dates are really for determining quality not safety. "Best if used before or by" has nothing to do with product safety. It's a date set by the manufacturer or processor that establishes a point in time that after which the quality, usually texture or color, of a product may begin to deteriorate.

Some foods have a "sell by" date. That's for the store to use to know when to remove the product from sale. Yet products are good beyond the sell by date. How far beyond is a tough question and is different by product.

On a recent inspection at Jimmy's, our friend from the health department cited us for an out of date container of buttermilk. It had a sell by date a couple of days before the date he was there. Now we know that the ALDPH interprets sell by and use by as the same even though the dairy product manufacturers don't.

That's probably a good idea. Better to be extra safe than not. Our score was 97 by the way.

All of the dates we see assume optimal storage conditions. If you leave that carton of milk on the counter for a couple of hours, that date now means much less. Ditto for that package of hot dogs. If the temperature in your kitchen storage area gets to 80 degrees, the dates on those cans may be shortened by half.

Speaking of cans: don't buy a dented can. Its safety has been compromised. If a can gives or is swollen in any way, throw it out.

Canned goods have numbers on them that will allow that can to be traced back to the day and location of manufacture. They also have a date for best usage. To quote food manufacturers "High acid foods last from one to two years. Low acid foods last two to five years."

One to five years is sort of a wide window. And that's a best if used by date.

You also see statements like "expires." I like that one. Then there are ones like "keep frozen" and "refrigerate after opening." If you don't do that, any dates you see are meaningless.

Very little food gets better after you buy it. The quality degrades quickly. Soon after, the safety factor looms its ugly head. Just because that bottle of ketchup has been in the refrigerator, except for those times it was on your table and got warm, doesn't mean it is good forever.

Basically product safety or its worthiness of consumption is left up to us. The dates are merely a guideline to help us. They are not guarantees.

A good idea is to date the things you buy – especially if you buy in quantity. I buy San Marzano tomatoes a case at the time for use at home. If I don't change brands, I take a Sharpie and date the cans. Then I know which ones to use first.

It can be a good idea to make a note on a jar or can. You may be several months using some special something you saw one day. Then you find that you like it and can't remember where you got it. Your note will tell you.

At Jimmy's we put a discard date on everything we put in the fridge. We want to know when to toss it. Not when it was opened or made. That's a good idea for you to do at home. Date that ketchup bottle and you'll know when you got it.

So if you want to be as safe as you can, buy it and use it. Buy it from a place that has good storage and is clean. Buy from a place that has high turnover and regularly rotates their stock. Buy from a place that

has a manager or owner that you see on a regular basis. Chances are they care more about their products and in turn more about you.