

Food labels don't tell the whole story

by Sabine Eiche

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People buying and selling old art are concerned about provenance – they need to know where the work of art comes from, who previously owned it. As to the provenance of provenance – it's the Latin "provenire," to come forth. Provenance, besides shining light on the work of art's history, helps in establishing its authenticity. It also helps to determine whether it's been acquired legally or illegally. For years, newspapers have revelled in stories of major museums forced to relinquish works of art because of what their provenance revealed.

Also we, the average citizens, are affected by questions of provenance. When we arrive at an airport from abroad, the immigration authorities demand to know from where we've come. They even want to know if we've passed through other countries on our way.

In view of this universal anxiety about the comings and goings of things and people, it baffles me that the Canadian government continues to be button-lipped regarding the provenance of some foods sold here. They're forthcoming if the origin of the food is Canadian, because then the label reads "Product of Canada," according to which "all or virtually all of the significant ingredients, components, processing and labour used in the food product must be Canadian" (but what precisely do they mean by "virtually" and "significant"?).

However, many labels state no more than "Prepared for," leaving us in the dark about the source of the product's ingredients. Why won't they tell us? Sometimes the label states the ingredients are imported, but doesn't divulge the

country of origin. Aylmer says its canned tomatoes are from “domestic and imported ingredients.” (Did you know that China is the world’s largest tomato producer?)

Another point – it’s not enough to merely read the label, we also have to understand what certain names imply. For instance, the brand Hunt’s (preserved tomato products) is owned by ConAgra Foods, the company notoriously opposed to identifying genetically modified ingredients in its products.

Of course, when the label reveals all, it can sometimes lead to head-scratching. Examining cans of the local brand Western Family, I discovered that their entire range of organic beans is from the U.S.A., as are their cherries and plums. And their mushrooms are produce of China. Don’t mushrooms, cherries, plums and organic beans grow in B.C.?

Now, in the so-called bulk food department, there’s a complete blackout of information about the sources. Surely someone at the beginning of the chain knows where the nuts, raisins, spices, etc., come from. Why aren’t we to know? Is it a nasty secret? Sometimes it’s possible to tell from the appearance of the item – I can make an informed guess that the pine nuts come from Asia. What about the other nuts? And the dried fruit? The cereals? Am I the only person who’s become suspicious about their provenance?

Naturally, if it’s disclosed that all these foodstuffs parading incognito in fact come from countries with reprehensible health and safety standards, many of us might refuse to buy them. But give us the choice.

We have a right (and duty) to know the “fons et origo” (source and origin) of what we buy – be it a Michelangelo masterpiece or a tin of tomatoes!

