What's a "natural" flavor? [1]

Dear Alice,

When reading the labels of food containers, it will often list "natural flavors" as an ingredient. My question is what exactly is a "natural flavor"? Wouldn't the product already have that flavor if it's natural?

Thanks,

Puzzled Foodie

Answer

Dear Puzzled Foodie,

Seeing the words "natural flavors" on a food label can be confusing. In this case, the first thing to understand is that natural flavors are listed on the label because they have been added to the food. That is, it's not natural to whatever food product you are consuming. Most processed foods, in fact, have flavors (either natural, artificial, or both) added to them during the production process. Flavors are made by flavorists in a laboratory, either by blending natural or synthetic chemicals together to enhance taste. Blending chemicals derived from a natural source, such as a plant or animal product, makes natural flavors. Combining synthetic (human-made) chemicals, on the other hand, makes artificial flavors. Therefore, the primary difference between natural and artificial flavorings is in the origin of the chemicals used to produce their tastes.

While the primary chemicals ingested with natural and artificial flavoring may be the same, a big difference between the two types of flavors relates to cost. The search for "natural" sources of chemicals often requires that a manufacturer go to great lengths to obtain a given chemical. Even though this natural chemical may be chemically identical to the version made in a flavorist's laboratory, it is much more expensive than the synthetic alternative. In the end, natural flavors are neither better in quality nor healthier than their more cost-effective artificial counterparts. In addition, the source of a natural flavor may not match what the label says. Raspberry flavor doesn't have to come from raspberries, for example.

Despite the natural origins of natural flavors, food companies are not required to disclose the chemicals used to create the flavor. In fact, a flavor could be the result of blending hundreds of unique chemicals. As a consumer, you may want to know what chemicals you are ingesting. If you are interested in getting the facts, you may be able to contact the food company directly. Perhaps they can specify exactly what flavorings are on the ingredient lists.
On the other hand, if you are looking to avoid both natural and artificial flavors completely, it is best to avoid processed foods. You can check ingredient lists and packaging for any sign of "natural" or "artificial flavors."

Hope this information leaves your taste buds tingling!

Alice!
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