

# Understanding food date labels can reduce waste

Americans are throwing out a staggering amount of perfectly good food every year. The cause: confusing date labels on the packaging.

The USDA estimates that as much as 30 percent of the food sold in the U.S. is pitched—the single largest category of material sent to municipal landfills—in no small part because of confusion about what the labels really mean.

You may be surprised to learn that there's no federal regulation of these labels. (One exception is baby food, whose dates are subject to regulation, and which require the food not be sold or used after its "Use by" date).

You may also be surprised to discover that most food is perfectly safe to consume a few days beyond those label dates. Less perishable items, like pasta and spices, are safe for considerably longer.

Let's go over the most common ones: "Best if used before ..." and "Best by..." This wording tells the consumer that if they eat this product before, or no later than, the date, they will be consuming the product at its ideal quality state. It does not mean that the food is bad or dangerous if consumed a few days later. No need to chuck it if the food still looks and smells fine (within reason).

"Use by ..." This date is provided on highly perishable products or those likely to become a health concern if they deteriorate (think ground beef). If it says "Use by" a certain date, well... use by that date. "Use by" dates are the most important dates to honor, as these are the ones that actually relate to food safety.

"Sell by ..." This label is for the retailer. It alerts the retailer when it's

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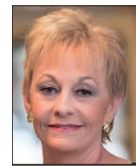
time to remove the item from the shelf so that it won't be sold past its peak of quality (consumers, after all, are not necessarily going to use it that very day, so the product needs to be sold when it's still very fresh). Just as with "Best if used before..." and "Best by..." it's not necessarily going to be bad.

What about canned foods? Food Network says the expiration dates on cans mark approximately three years from the time it was put on the shelf for sale and can generally be consumed up to four years after the expiration date, as long as the cans aren't damaged.

Aware of this massive label confusion, the Grocery Manufacturers Association has partnered with the Food Marketing Institute to simplify these labels and bring clarity to consumers. They narrowed date labeling down to two categories, to be adopted voluntarily, that leave far less room for interpretation: "Best If Used By..." and "Use By..." As this labeling becomes widely adopted it will, hopefully, reduce the amount of healthy, fresh food being discarded. In May, the Food Date Labeling Act of 2023 was introduced in Congress designed to reduce confusion but has yet to be enacted.

So ... before you mindlessly toss out food just because of its date, think back on what I've told you here and reconsider.

Gwen Carden is a journalist with a lifelong interest in consumer protection and education. Submit questions or column ideas to: [consumer@cardencreative.com](mailto:consumer@cardencreative.com).



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Consumer News

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## Palm Beach County: A golf paradise

As Palm Beach County prepares to host two major golf tournaments on Feb. 26, it's another reminder of the top-notch golfing at more than 160 courses throughout the county. The Match 2024 at The Park in West Palm Beach. The Park is a newly opened public course with sprawling bunkers, rolling fairways,

**The ongoing development of new courses near Michael Jordan's Grove XXIII, Apogee and Atlantic Fields in Hobe Sound, indicates a robust demand for the golf enthusiast. Atlantic Fields will have Tom Fazio golf and 317 homesites on 420 acres.**

No. 7 Max Homa, will be joined by major winner Lexi Thompson, of Delray Beach, at The Match 2024.

South Florida will continue to attract not only the world's best golfers, but their biggest fans. The ongoing development of new courses near Michael Jordan's Grove XXIII, Apogee and Atlantic Fields in Hobe Sound, indicates a robust demand for the golf enthusiast. Atlantic Fields will have Tom Fazio golf and 317 homesites on 420 acres.

The reason the world's best golfers are moving to Jupiter and Palm Beach County is the same reason why many so many out-of-state buyers and technology and financial firms are moving to South Florida: year-round sunshine, proximity to water for boating and beaches, picturesque golf courses, pro-business government, low taxes and lower real estate prices compared to other global cities.



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