

**The New York Times**

## ***Panera Bread Plans to Drop a Long List of Ingredients***

By **STEPHANIE STROM**

MAY 4, 2015



A Panera store in New York. The company says it will banish many artificial ingredients in 2016. CreditChang W. Lee/The New York Times

Acesulfame K. Ethoxyquin. Artificial smoke flavor.

The first, an artificial sweetener; the second, a preservative; and the third, a flavor enhancer, are just a few of the ingredients that [Panera Bread](#) wants to banish from its kitchens by the end of 2016.

In doing so, Panera would join the growing ranks of food companies and restaurants that have announced plans to eliminate a variety of artificial preservatives, flavors and colors, as well as different kinds of sweeteners and meat from animals raised with antibiotics, in response to consumer demands for transparency and simplicity in the foods they eat.

“We’re trying to draw a line in the sand in the industry so that consumers have an easy way to know what’s in the food they buy,” said Ron Shaich, chief executive of Panera.

In the last six months, at least a dozen food companies and restaurant businesses have announced plans to reformulate products to eliminate ingredients. “To me, this has gone way beyond anything that could even be remotely considered a fad and become a powerful trend,” said Carl Jorgensen, director for global consumer strategy focusing on wellness at Daymon Worldwide, a consulting firm.

Nestlé USA has said it will remove artificial flavorings and colors from its chocolate candy products, including brands like Butterfinger and Baby Ruth, as well as from Nesquik powdered drink mixes.

Hershey in December said it would work to replace high-fructose corn syrup in sweets like York peppermint patties and Almond Joy candy bars. Two months later, the company said it was moving to make all of its products from “ingredients that are simple and easy to understand.”

Kraft recently said it would replace the artificial colorings that give Macaroni and Cheese its orange hue with colors derived from spices like turmeric and paprika, and PepsiCo announced that it would use sucralose to sweeten Diet Pepsi instead of the artificial sweetener aspartame.

Last month, McDonald’s became the latest major restaurant chain to say it would no longer sell products made with chicken treated with human antibiotics. A few weeks later, Tyson Foods, a major meat company that is one of McDonald’s suppliers, said it would eliminate such antibiotics from its poultry and begin working to get them out of other meats as well.

Even Snackwell, which started its life as a brand with reduced fat, is undergoing a makeover aimed at getting rid of high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils and artificial colors and flavors. “In this day and age, the consumer who was satisfied with reduced fat or fat-free 20 years ago is not satisfied with that any more,” said Vincent Fantegrossi, chief executive of the Back to Nature Foods Company, which is owned by Brynwood Partners, a [private equity](#) group.

Retooling an iconic brand is tricky. Companies must make sure that consumers cannot detect any change in taste, texture or quality, or all may be lost.

“That actually makes the challenge for companies like us that have well-known brands greater, compared to small companies that can simply make a product from scratch without these ingredients,” said Leslie Mohr, marketing manager for Nestlé USA’s confectionary business.

While most of the companies have been careful to say they are merely responding to consumer demands, not making a value judgment on such ingredients, they often face heavy criticism. Chipotle Mexican Grill’s announcement that it had eliminated genetically modified ingredients from the foods it makes — though, like Panera, not from the sodas it sells — evoked a torrent of outraged responses.

The Washington Post editorial board [called Chipotle’s move a “gimmick”](#) that was “hard to swallow,” while NPR’s popular food blog, [The Salt, accused](#) the company of having a double standard for adopting sunflower oil, which it said was often treated with a pesticide known for weed resistance.

“This is a complicated issue, and I would suggest there is less here than meets the eye,” said L. Val Giddings, a senior fellow at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation.

Mr. Giddings noted that although General Mills got a lot of publicity for eliminating genetically modified ingredients from original Cheerios, those were just a tiny part of the cereal’s ingredients. “I think what they were doing at least in part was testing the water to see if they could capitalize on it, and what they have found is pretty illuminating,” he said. “The move had no impact on sales.”

Mr. Shaich said Panera’s decision to come up with what it calls “The No No List” had more to do with protecting the sales it has. The list is based on research and standards developed by Johns Hopkins, the Environmental Working Group, the Natural Resources Defense Council and various European governments.

“I’m not a scientist and I’m not wading into the debate over whether any of these things cause cancer or are otherwise bad for you,” he said. “I just think this is where the consumer’s head is right now.”

Panera uses more than 450 ingredients to prepare its foods. The company had to work with both its suppliers and their suppliers, who themselves were not always sure whether their products contained the ingredients Panera has decided to eliminate.

“These ingredients have been added over time to improve efficiency and consistency and as preservatives as supply chains have gotten longer and longer,” said Sara Burnett, senior quality assurance manager at Panera.

Solutions are not always perfect. Panera is rejecting titanium dioxide, a whitener commonly used in products like ice cream and icings, from its mozzarella, yet cheese browns as it ages. “We don’t know how customers will react,” Ms. Burnett said.

Salad dressing proved the menu item most difficult to reformulate, she said, in part because different oils impart specific viscosity and taste. For Greek salad dressing, Panera had to take apart the spice mix it used and go back to the basics — lemon juice, garlic, oregano and rosemary.

“We learned we don’t have to have these things on the list,” Ms. Burnett said, “so why have them?”