Artificial dyes fading, but food will still get color boosts

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This May 28, 2015 file photo shows cheddar cheese Madison, Wis. The practice of adding color to cheddar cheese reaches back to when cheesemakers in England skimmed the butterfat from milk to make butter, according to Elizabeth Chubbuck of Murray's Cheese in New York. The leftover milk was whiter, so pigments were added to recreate butterfat's golden hue, she said. (Amber Arnold/Wisconsin State Journal via AP)

Many companies including McDonald's and Kellogg are purging

artificial colors from their foods, but don't expect your cheeseburgers or cereal to look much different.

Colors send important signals about food, and companies aren't going to stop playing into those perceptions.

What's accepted as normal can change, too, and vary by region. Up until the 1980s, Americans expected pistachios to be red because they were mostly imported from places where the nuts were dyed to cover imperfections.

"People used to get all the coloring all over their fingers. We now kind of laugh at that," said Richard Matoian, executive director of the American Pistachio Growers, a trade association.

Now most pistachios sold in the U.S. are grown domestically and come in their naturally pale shells.

McDonald's announced in September that it had removed artificial colors from many of its burgers and Kellogg has pledged to remove them from its cereals by the end of this year.

Americans, however, apparently aren't entirely ready to part with the technicolor pieces that float around in milk. After removing artificial colors from Trix, General Mills poured them back in last year to bring back a "classic" version in response to customer demand.

But it's not just processed and packaged foods that create illusions with colors.

CHEESE

Boar's Head, Cabot, Kraft, Tillamook. Check the packages of most

cheddar cheeses, and they'll likely list an ingredient called annatto, a plant extract commonly used for color.

In this April 25, 2003 file photo, fillets of farm-raised salmon are sprayed with water at a local fish market in Portland, Maine. The Food and Drug Administration notes that manufacturers have to declare on labeling if color additives were used for salmon. (AP Photo/Pat Wellenbach)

The practice reaches back to when cheesemakers in England skimmed the butterfat from milk to make butter, according to Elizabeth Chubbuck

of Murray's Cheese in New York. The leftover milk was whiter, so cheesemakers added pigments to recreate butterfat's golden hue, she said.

Another cheese that sometimes gets cosmetic help: mozzarella.

Sara Burnett, director of food policy at Panera Bread, said mozzarella sometimes gets its bright white from titanium dioxide, a widely used ingredient in products like mints and doughnuts.

Without it, mozzarella would be beige or off-white.

The whitening is done because most U.S.-made mozzarella starts with cow's milk, which can have yellow hues, said Cathy Strange, global cheese buyer at Whole Foods.

In Italy, she said, mozzarella is traditionally made with water buffalo milk, which is whiter because the animal can't digest beta carotene.

EGG YOLKS

Many home cooks think darker egg yolks are fresher or more nutritious. But the color may be the result of marigold petals, alfalfa or coloring products in chicken feed.

Yolk color is primarily determined by the carotenoids—naturally occurring pigments in plants—that hens eat, according to Elizabeth Bobeck, a poultry nutrition professor at Iowa State University. It's easy to change yolk colors by simply altering hens' diet, she said.

Darker yolks aren't necessarily healthier, Bobeck said. The belief that they are is likely rooted in the idea that yolks are darker when hens are fed a diet of fresh plants, which contain the pigments.

This undated photo shows the darker orange yolk of a homegrown chicken egg, left, compared with the lighter yolk of a store-bought egg in Gillette, Wyo. Yolk color is primarily determined by the carotenoids—naturally occurring pigments in plants—that hens eat, according to Elizabeth Bobeck, a poultry nutrition professor at Iowa State University. (Pete Rodman/Gillette News Record via AP)

Marc Dresner, a spokesman for the American Egg Board, said yolk colors varied more when chickens were fed whatever was available in the barnyard. Commercial feed has made yolk colors more consistent, but synthetic color additives are not allowed for chicken feed, Dresner said.

Bart Slaugh, a representative for Eggland's, noted mayonnaise and pasta makers may prefer paler yolks.

SALMON

Bright pink flesh may signal freshness to shoppers eyeing salmon filets, which is why farmed salmon may have been fed synthetic astaxanthin, a version of a naturally occurring compound.

The Food and Drug Administration notes that manufacturers have to declare on labeling if color additives were used for salmon. At Costco, farmed salmon is labeled with the disclosure "color added through feed."

It may not sound appetizing, but manufacturers know the difference color can make.

Salmon with a darker flesh can command an extra 50 cents to $1 per pound when offered side by side with lighter salmon, according to research by animal feed maker DSM.

To help producers size up the desirability of their salmon, the company offers a "SalmoFan " with varying shades of pink to help judge flesh colors.

Representatives for DSM did not respond to requests for comment.

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