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23 HR HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, September 3, 1931.

Subject: "Read The Mushroom Labels" Information from Food and Drug Administration.

Publication available: Mimeograph, "Read the Label No. 38 - Mushrooms"

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Bachelor Bill, the Food and Drug Inspector, Uncle Ebenezer's constant chess companion, paid me another installment yesterday on his board and entertainment account.

You may recall that every once in a while I collect some "how to read the label" information from Bill in part payment of his chess club dues at our house.

Even in these parlous times, I splurge on a meal about once a month. Yesterday I felt one of those splurges coming on, and today's dinner will center about a steak smothered in mushrooms. That's how I happened to get some facts on account from Bill. I cornered him yesterday evening as he arrived for the weekly session over the chess board.

"Don't take off your hat, Bill," I ordered. "Come on down to Dad Dezenderfer's delicatessen with me." He obeyed, and on the way down the block, I explained that his job just at the minute was to tell me how to read the labels on those mushroom cans.

Bill has to set his stage for one of his buying lectures. When we got to the delicatessen he persuaded Dad Dezenderfer to set up an exhibit for me on the counter. He grouped a lot of cans of mushrooms before me. Then, with Dad nodding his interested assent in the background, Bill launched into his speech.

"Aunt Sammy," he said, "You've got to know, first, that there are imported canned mushrooms and domestic canned mushrooms. The imported come from France and other European countries. Here are a couple of cans of imported. See this word 'Champignons' on this one?"

"Don't be elementary, Bill," said I. "I know that's French for mushrooms."

"Right enough," said Bill, "That's all that the word 'Champignons' means on a can -- Mushrooms. Now what does the word 'button' on this label mean to you?"

"Not much," I confessed.

"It means simply that the can contains the buds or unopened mushrooms gathered before the gills are formed and before the veils break," Bill told me. "Now that you know the meaning of these terms, you're ready for a lesson

in the different grades of canned mushrooms and how they are designated by the French packers on the labels of the cans they send to this country.

"You'll see that I have set out here, with Dad's help, three grades of canned mushrooms. The best is labeled 'Extras.' Next best, 'First Choice.' Third best, 'Choice.'

"Now quality in mushrooms is represented by light creamy color and physical perfection -- that is, absence of defects, such as black or brown spots, breaks, over-ripening, and the like. Extras, then, are the most select quality--they are buttons with the stems cut flush with the caps. First choice is an excellent quality representing buttons of good color and with a minimum of defects. Choice is the poorest grade of buttons. When you find this word on the label you may know that the mushrooms may be off in color or otherwise defective and they may have relatively long stems.

"Come back now to that first group, the Extra quality. You'll see several cans in the group. They each bear a designation intended to indicate the size of the mushroom buttons. Here's the line-up according to size of buttons in the Extra quality grade:

"Smallest are labeled 'Extra Minature.' They run 150 to 200 buttons in each one-half pound can.

"Next, 'Minature.' They're slightly larger, running from 100 to 150 per half-pound can.

"Then in order, going right down the line: 'Sur Petite Extra,' 80 to 100 buttons per half-pound can; 'Sur Extra,' 60 to 80 per half-pound; 'Small Extra' or 'Extra Petite,' 40 to 60; 'Extra,' 30 to 40.

"The 'First Choice' and 'Choice' grades are not sized."

"But, Bill, "I interrupted," that's just three general grade groups, and you've set out four."

"So I have," said Bill, "The fourth group is labeled, you'll notice, 'Pieces and Stems.' That means that the product in the can is composed of broken pieces of mushrooms with an excess of stems obtained when the packer trimmed the whole mushroom buttons for canning the higher grades."

"Now, check me on this, Bill," I asked, "I'm going to name these cans in the order of quality, and the order that they ought to follow in price. I'll start with the highest-priced and work down to the lowest:

"Highest, 'Extra Minature. 'Then, in order, 'Minature,' 'Sur Petite Extra,' 'Sur Extra,' 'Small Extra or Extra Petite,' 'Extra,' 'First Choice,' 'Choice,' 'Pieces and Stems.'"

"Right as rain," Bill complimented his pupil.

"Now, how about the American grades?" I queried.

"Step this way, lady," and Bill led me to another display of canned mushrooms.

"You'll usually find only three grades of American-canned mushrooms," he assured me. "American canners, in general, use only the first grade mushroom buttons for canning. That is, they use essentially perfect, undamaged buttons of best quality. A few domestic packers use the terms, 'First Choice,' or 'First Choice Buttons,' on their labels, but as you'll notice there are no labels of this sort in Dad's stock. Nor in very many other stocks.

"That's because practically all whole mushrooms packed in this country are of the first grade. So I've set out here the three grades you're likely to find. Then best is 'Mushrooms' or 'Mushroom Buttons.' Next comes 'Sliced Mushrooms.' Third, 'Pieces and Stems.'

"Not all American packers describe the sizes of whole mushrooms on their labels. But generally you'll find that the size of the buttons varies according to the size of the can. Very large mushrooms are seldom packed as whole mushrooms in this country. The smaller buttons are in the smaller cans. Very small buttons usually are in two-ounce cans; slightly larger in four-ounce, and so on. Moreover, the general practice is to leave slightly longer stems as the size of button increases. Some American packers do not use any label statement to indicate the size of button, but even so they may sell different sizes under the same brand and label. Dad here, or any other dealer can tell these sizes apart by the color of the label, however. You just tell Dad that you want small or large buttons, and pay less for the large buttons than for the small ones.

"That's right," confirmed Dad.

Then Bill pointed to his second can of domestic mushrooms. It was labeled, "Sliced Mushrooms."

"That's exclusively an American product, Aunt Sammy," he told me. "No foreign packers put up sliced mushrooms. They're whole mushrooms that have gone somewhat beyond the button stage, and have been sliced before packing."

Bill's third exhibit, domestic 'Pieces and Stems,' he described as much like the French 'Pieces and Stems.' He had one can in this group labeled "Hotels." He explained that this is sometimes used instead of "Pieces and Stems." The two words are synonymous on canned mushroom labels.

Bill's final group of domestic mushrooms bore such labels as "Mushroom Juice," "Mushroom Broth," and "Mushroom Soup." He explained that such products consist principally of water, salt, and the flavor of mushrooms.

"Now there," Bill concluded, "you have an outline of the different qualities of canned mushrooms. Remember the ranking of these grades. Then consider also, very carefully, the net weights content on mushroom cans.

"Some packers declare on the labels the net weight of mushrooms in the can. Others may declare the net weight of the entire contents of the can, including the liquid. You'll get no more mushrooms from a can labeled '7 ounces net contents -- juice and mushrooms' than you will from a can labeled

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'4 ounces net weight mushrooms.'

"Remember always when buying mushrooms that they are canned in definite sized cans, 2-ounce, 4-ounce, 8-ounce, etc. Now this means the QUANTITY OF MUSHROOMS IN THE CAN, not the total contents of liquid and mushrooms in the can. Occasionally you'll find a can labeled like this one," and he pointed to a label reading, "This can contains 4 ounces net of cooked mushrooms, the equivalent of about 7 ounces fresh mushrooms."

That label means, of course, " Bill proceeded, "that in the process of canning some of the water in the fresh mushrooms has been lost, but it does not mean that you are getting a larger equivalent in that particular can than you would in one labeled only with the simple statement, '4 ounces net of mushrooms.

"Finally, Aunt Sammy, don't take too seriously such words on labels of canned mushrooms as 'Hot House Grown,' 'Natural Flavor,' 'Unbleached,' 'Fancy,' 'The Best Flavor,' and the like. They have no particular differentiating significance since the terms are generally applicable to all American mushroom packers' products."

Goodness, I see I've overrun my time. But I know that you, like me, will want a copy of an outline of these mushroom grades, because you'll find it as hard to remember all of them as I did. I got that outline from Bill -- it's an excerpt from a radio talk by a district chief of the Food and Drug Administration. If you want a copy drop me a line.

Friday: "A Fish Dinner."

