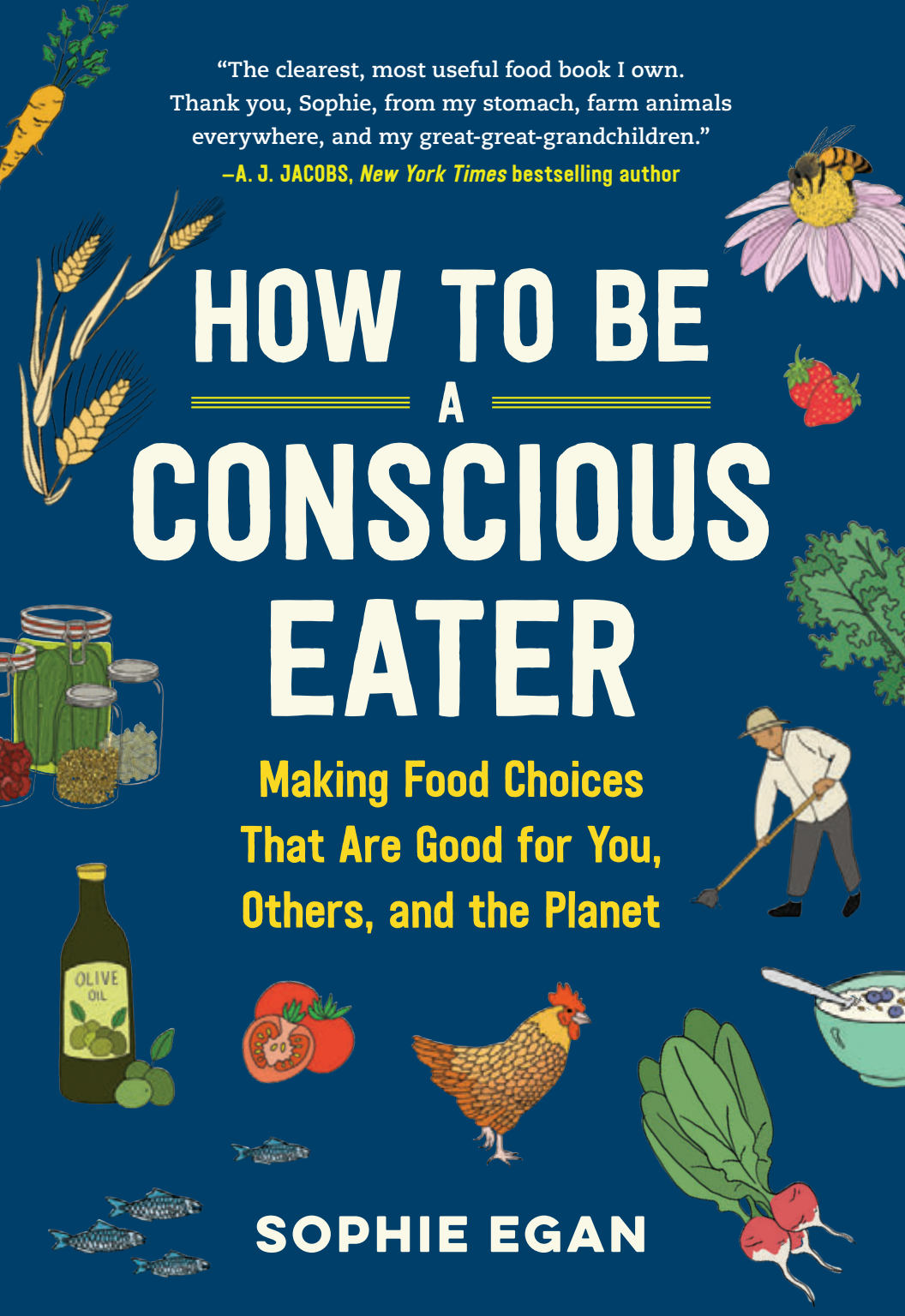


"The clearest, most useful food book I own.
Thank you, Sophie, from my stomach, farm animals
everywhere, and my great-great-grandchildren."

—A. J. JACOBS, *New York Times* bestselling author



HOW TO BE A CONSCIOUS EATER

**Making Food Choices
That Are Good for You,
Others, and the Planet**

SOPHIE EGAN

STICKERS TO KNOW

What do all those little symbols and buzzwords mean on the side or bottom corner of a package? Beyond health, the third-party certification labels selected below are among the most meaningful signifiers of superior social or environmental considerations for stuff that comes from the ground. Some also appear on stuff that comes from animals as well as stuff you get from restaurant kitchens and factories. Some are regulated by federal agencies, and others are provided by advocacy groups or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Align your values with these labels' assurances to decide where best to spend your extra grocery dollars.

CERTIFIED ORGANIC OR USDA ORGANIC

What it means: The standards prohibit a range of practices and substances, but it boils down to

- * no synthetic pesticides,
- * no growth hormones, and
- * no antibiotics.



On a label for a processed food product, USDA organic certification means that 95 percent or more of the ingredients in the product were certified organic.

What it doesn't mean: That the product itself is nutritious. (Organic chocolate frosting is still chocolate frosting.) On animal-based foods, it also does not guarantee ambitious animal welfare standards, so if those are important to you, look for a label other than organic certification.

Who's behind it: US Department of Agriculture

Why it's legit: It has among the most rigorous and comprehensive standards as far as how a food is grown. In short, these standards can support ecosystems and farmworkers' health (though not necessarily their wages) because the farming practices are less intensive than conventional methods.

FAIRTRADE, FAIR FOR LIFE, AND FAIR TRADE CERTIFIED

What it means:

- * good, safe working conditions on farms,
- * prevents discrimination and harassment,
- * prohibits forced labor and child labor, and
- * a price premium is often fed into a fund for local projects.

Bananas are a common item I'd encourage you to buy fair trade certified.

What it doesn't mean: That workers are earning a *livable* wage. The three certifications ensure payment of minimum wage, but at the time you purchase a product, a manufacturer may only be gradually upping the pay of its workers. This means their livelihoods may not yet be as secure as you might imagine, depending on the cost of living in their area. For assurance of the highest pay, Consumer Reports considers Fair for Life to have the strongest policy of the three.



Who's behind it: Fairtrade International (with audits and inspections done by its certification body, FLOCERT); Europe-based ECOCERT; and Fair Trade USA, respectively

Why it's legit: In the words of Fairtrade International, “Not all trade is fair! Farmers and workers at the beginning of the chain don't always get a fair share of the benefits of trade. Fairtrade enables consumers to put this right.” All of the standards described above involve rigorous inspections to verify compliance.

BIRD FRIENDLY

What it means: Used for coffee specifically, which is grown in the tropics, the sticker includes the organic standards but goes even further. It signals

- * that the homes of migratory birds are respected,
- * that insect biodiversity is maintained, and
- * that coffee is grown in shade (the canopies of which can sequester carbon and help mitigate climate change).



These issues matter because forests typically get cut down as part of coffee production, and much wildlife habitat can be destroyed.

What it doesn't mean: That it applies to any products other than coffee. At least for now.

Who's behind it: The Smithsonian, specifically its National Zoo & Conservation Biology Institute

Why it's legit: Of all the coffee certification programs, this label is considered one of the most rigorous for habitat conservation.

BIODYNAMIC

What it means:

- * Ensures that growers use methods that promote water conservation, soil health, and animal welfare while treating wetlands, grasslands, and forests as part of a self-sustaining farm as a whole.
- * Rather than relying on fertilizers and fungicides, a grower draws solutions from within the farm as an ecosystem (such as animal manure).
- * Requires that at least 10 percent of a farm's total land be off limits for farming in order to exist as a biodiversity preserve.



What it doesn't mean: That every product made from crops from that farm is biodynamic. Wine is the most common example. The grapes may have been biodynamically grown, but to be a biodynamic wine, the Demeter Processing Standards would also need to be met by the winemaker.

Who's behind it: Demeter USA, part of Demeter International

Why it's legit: With farms undergoing careful scrutiny through annual inspections, this label takes the organic standard as a baseline and pushes beyond merely not doing harm to the soil and surrounding ecosystems to actively helping them thrive.

STICKERS TO KNOW

What do all those little symbols and buzzwords mean on the side or bottom corner of a package? Beyond health, the third-party certification labels selected below are among the most meaningful signifiers of superior social, animal welfare, or environmental considerations. Some are regulated by federal agencies, and others are provided by advocacy groups or NGOs. They apply to the wide range of stuff that comes from animals. Align your values with these labels' assurances to decide where best to spend your extra grocery dollars.

CERTIFIED ORGANIC OR USDA ORGANIC

What it means: The standards prohibit a range of practices and substances, but it boils down to

- * no synthetic pesticides,
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On a label for a processed food product, USDA organic certification means that 95 percent or more of the ingredients in the product were certified organic.

What it doesn't mean: That the product itself is nutritious. It also does not guarantee ambitious animal welfare standards, so if those are important to you, look for a label other than organic certification.

Who's behind it: US Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Why it's legit: It has among the most rigorous and comprehensive standards as far as how a food is grown or raised. In short, these standards can support ecosystems and farmworkers' health (though not necessarily their wages) because the farming practices are less intensive than conventional methods.

ANIMAL WELFARE APPROVED

What it means: Animals were raised on family farms and free to “engage in their natural behaviors.” Applied to those raised for meat, dairy, or eggs, this label reflects one of the few times when reality actually aligns with the image most consumers have in their minds of what humane animal husbandry ought to look like: living outside, on pasture. A full list of humane practices encapsulated in this label by species can be found at greenerchoices.org.



What it doesn't mean: That other environmentally sustainable farming practices were necessarily used, though they are encouraged. That said, if pesticides and herbicides were used, animals with this label would be kept off the treated areas for at least three weeks.

Who's behind it: A Greener World

Why it's legit: This is the top-rated animal welfare certification on the market, according to Consumer Reports.

CERTIFIED HUMANE RAISED AND HANDLED

What it means: Chickens and pigs get comfy bedding and clean litter, there are no small cages prohibiting free movement, and, most concerning, physical alterations (like docking pig tails) are prohibited, whereas others—like trimming the beaks of laying hens—are allowed. The latter is done so the hens don't peck each other to death and is considered less invasive and more humane than debeaking. Of course, this wouldn't be necessary if flocks were given enough space to move around freely. For the most part, slaughter standards of animals are higher than industry norms.



What it doesn't mean: Access to the outdoors and fresh air for these animals, which of course most of us would expect from a “Certified Humane” label.

Who's behind it: Humane Farm Animal Care

Why it's legit: This is Consumer Reports' second-highest-rated animal welfare certification, though it's considered “meaningful” only for animal welfare, rather than the gold standard of “highly meaningful” bestowed to “Animal Welfare Approved.” Representatives from the Humane Society of the United States and the NGO Farm Forward also both cite this as a top animal welfare label.

GLOBAL ANIMAL PARTNERSHIP (GAP) CERTIFIED

What it means: It represents several standards for animal welfare, tailored to specific species, in a five-step program. Step 1: no cages, crates, or crowding; Step 2: enriched environment; Step 3: enhanced outdoor access; Step 4: pasture-centered; Step 5: animal-centered and no physical alterations; Step 5+: animal-centered and their entire life is spent on the same farm (except for chickens, which may be transferred right before slaughter). It also means no growth hormones, animal by-products in any species' feed, or antibiotics (except for chickens). This is the highest rating available.



What it doesn't mean: To date, it applies only to meat and eggs, so it does not apply to the animal care behind dairy products.

Who's behind it: Global Animal Partnership

Why it's legit: Participating farms get audited every fifteen months and are encouraged to move up the ladder over time. Whole Foods Market, a clear retail leader with respect to consumers' right to transparency about what they're buying, helped launch the program back in 2008.

NO ANTIBIOTICS

What it means: This is a category of terms, not a specific label, so the point here is simply to persuade you to allocate your animal-product grocery dollars to support any verified indication of lower uses of antibiotics that are medically important to humans. Guess what? All four of the labels I just listed already check this box, as does American Grassfed, the next one down. In the absence of a third-party logo

certification, other phrases that are legit include “Raised without antibiotics,” “No antibiotics administered,” and “No antibiotics ever.” Note that “Antibiotic-free” is a misleading label whose meaning is unspecified.

What it doesn't mean: That other comprehensive practices—whether for animal welfare, farmworker health, or environmental sustainability—were involved. For those, turn to certified organic and the other more specific third-party assurances.

Who's behind it: Varies, but usually the producer

Why it's legit: It's critically important for public health that producers reduce the use of antibiotics in the food supply. Only then can we ensure that the ones used in human medicine remain effective.

AMERICAN GRASSFED

What it means: The cow—or goat, lamb, or bison—really ate only grass or forage (or hay, which is dried grass, in winter). The exception is when they (rightfully) had milk from their mother before they were weaned. It also means animals were raised only on pasture, so they didn't experience cruel confinement in feedlots, they didn't receive antibiotics or growth hormones, and they were born and raised on American family farms.



What it doesn't mean: That other rigorous humane practices were involved once they left the farm (such as en route to slaughter), though electric prods are generally prohibited.

Who's behind it: American Grassfed Association

Why it's legit: All of the cattle that get turned into beef eat some grass during their lives, but how much is the big question, because ruminant animals are simply not designed to eat grain. Consumer Reports considers “American Grassfed” one of the most meaningful ways of knowing these animals were raised on a diet that’s good for them. As discussed earlier, healthy animals are healthy for humans and the planet, too.

PCO CERTIFIED 100% GRASSFED

What it means: The cow really ate only grass or forage (or hay in winter). This label applies to beef and dairy products specifically.



What it doesn't mean: Again, that rigorous humane animal welfare practices were involved, though the standards of organic are strictly enforced.

Who's behind it: Pennsylvania Certified Organic organization

Why it's legit: Healthy diets of dairy cows yield many benefits similar to those of beef cattle, and the FDA doesn't regulate the definition of *grass-fed* for dairy products, so this label is particularly helpful.

SEAFOOD WATCH “BEST CHOICE,” “GOOD ALTERNATIVE,” AND “AVOID” LABELS

What it means: You won't find the labels on fish products themselves, but free, downloadable guides are available for all fifty states, as is a mobile phone app so you can easily reference which types of fish and seafood are considered best, worst, and in between. Seafood Watch uses a three-part rating scheme: “Best” (labeled green) means the fish are caught or farmed using methods that are minimally damaging to marine life and environments. They exist in



abundant supply. “Good” (labeled yellow) means they’re fine for you to buy, but some issues have been identified with how they are caught or farmed. “Avoid” (labeled red) means they’re caught or farmed in harmful ways and/or that they are overfished. The criteria behind these categories are based on the optimal locations of origin, species type, and aquaculture methods or fishing equipment.

What it doesn't mean: That fair prices were necessarily given to the fishermen or fisherwomen, or that those individuals caught the fish under humane work conditions. For those issues, Seafood Watch developed the separate Seafood Slavery Risk Tool.

Who's behind it: Monterey Bay Aquarium

Why it's legit: By far the most comprehensive, trusted, and widely recognized certifier of sustainable seafood on the market, it is used by both retailers and restaurants to ensure fish and shellfish choices that do not deplete certain species or degrade oceans or waterways.

MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL'S BLUE FISH LABEL

What it means: It provides third-party assurance that *wild-caught* fish and seafood products have been certified as sustainable,



which is especially useful if you're not sure where an item stands in Seafood Watch's book. You can find it at the fish counter and on fish products, supplements (like fish oil), and even pet food.

What it doesn't mean: That the same standards apply to farmed fish and seafood. For those, refer to Seafood Watch, again, or to the Aquaculture Stewardship Council's certification scheme.

Who's behind it: Marine Stewardship Council, a UK-based organization that developed the first certification for wild, sustainable seafood

Why it's legit: To be certified, fisheries must meet twenty-eight carefully audited criteria across three key principles that make up their definition of *sustainable*: fish caught from stocks whose populations are thriving, in ways that minimally impact the surrounding environment, and from regions where fishery management is up to snuff. No wonder Monterey Bay Aquarium endorses them, since their standards are clearly aligned.

AQUACULTURE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL CERTIFICATION

What it means: It provides third-party assurance that *farmed* fish and seafood products have been certified as environmentally sustainable and socially responsible, which is especially useful if you're not sure where an item stands in Seafood Watch's book. Their strict standards minimize the impact of fish farming on water quality and surrounding habitats and marine life, require responsible disease management, and enforce fair wages



and good working conditions for workers in the industry, including prohibiting both child labor and forced labor.

What it doesn't mean: That the same standards apply to wild-caught fish and seafood. For those, refer to Seafood Watch or the Marine Stewardship Council's blue fish label.

Who's behind it: Aquaculture Stewardship Council

Why it's legit: Their framework is about as rigorous as you can find for food farmed from the sea.

REFRESHER ON THE MEANINGS OF EGG LABELS

MEANINGFUL

"Animal Welfare Approved." Considered the top animal welfare label on the market by Consumer Reports, this label represents producers who have gone well beyond cage-free or free-range or ensuring appropriate feed. It means animals are given the freedom to engage in their natural behaviors. For egg-laying hens, you can imagine chickens allowed to walk around, peck for bugs, nest, and so on.

"Certified Humane Raised and Handled." This certification ensures that specific standards have been met for one of the three levels related to eggs—cage-free, free-range, or pasture-raised. If you see this label, you'll also see one of those three designations.

"Global Animal Partnership (GAP) Certified." This is a five-step program tailored to specific species and includes egg-laying hens. Look for these different steps, which have different label colors: Step 1: no cages, crates, or crowding; Step 2: enriched environments; Step 3: enhanced outdoor access; Step 4: pasture-centered; Step 5: animal-centered and no physical alterations; Step 5+: animal-centered and their entire

lives are spent on the same farm (except for chickens, which may be transferred right before slaughter). It also means no growth hormones, animal by-products in any species' feed, or antibiotics (except for chickens). This is the highest rating available.

"No Antibiotics." This means egg producers did not add antibiotics to the feed or water of the egg-laying chickens.

"Certified Organic." Carefully regulated by the USDA, organic certification sets specific requirements for what egg-laying hens are fed—the food must be vegetarian and free from pesticides or antibiotics—and how the land they're raised on is treated. So, it's a strong one from environmental and public health standpoints. Where it's not so strong is animal welfare. For assurance of access to the outdoors or more extensive lifestyle enhancements for the birds, look for the aforementioned animal welfare labels or the more rigorous versions of "pasture-raised" or "free-range," as described below.

SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

"Cage-Free." Hens are likely still raised in very confined quarters squished up against each other, and they may or may not be let outdoors. But at least they're not in tiny cages, and in theory they are free to move around and do their usual chicken thing. Cage-free means a heck of a lot more when buying eggs—whose hens are indeed most commonly confined to cruelly small cages—than it does when buying chicken, because broilers aren't usually raised in cages to begin with.

"Free-Range" or "Free-Roaming." This one is often interchangeable with "cage-free," except its extra selling point is outdoor

access. Again, it's best if it's attached to a third-party verification for animal welfare standards.

"Pasture-Raised." A fairly good indicator, the term means birds were mostly raised outside and let loose to roam and forage for food. Consider it a notch above free-range and cage-free. That said, it's not enforced by the USDA, so the exact meaning is rather hazy. Your best bet is to trust this claim when it is paired with one of the legit animal welfare labels like "Certified Humane Raised and Handled."

"Vegetarian-Fed." This is fairly straightforward, but the reason it's noteworthy is that a lot of agribusiness involves feeding food animals parts of other animals. Although this issue isn't as relevant in the egg industry as it is in meat and poultry, it can be a reassurance for some shoppers, and especially vegetarian shoppers.

"Omega-3s." This label means the hens' feed included one of the main sources of omega-3 fatty acids—most commonly fish oil, flaxseeds, or flaxseed oil. Although you can indeed add to your daily omega-3 tally this way, the challenge is knowing which type of omega-3 and how much you're getting, since the conversion to human nutrients is unclear on the packaging and not required on the label. These eggs are probably perfectly fine to eat but can sometimes be a waste of the extra money. You might focus your omega-hunting attentions elsewhere in your diet, such as by eating the fish or flaxseed directly.