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VEGETARIAN CERTIFICATIONS ON FOOD LABELS

WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

BY JEANNE YACOUBOU, MS

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of vegetarian and vegan symbols on food packages, keeping pace with the retail sales of meat-free foods and the growth of the vegetarian market. Several vegetarian and vegan nonprofit organizations in North America and Europe have introduced these icons for use on packaged food products and for display in restaurants. These organizations approve companies and restaurants to use their logos. Along with these groups, many private companies have developed vegetarian and vegan icons for their own food items, including some large, mainstream corporations, such as Campbell's. This article will explain what these logos mean and discuss their reliability in assuring that a packaged food product is authentically vegetarian or vegan.

While doing research for this article, we discovered that every group or company has its own guidelines for certifying a food product as vegetarian or vegan. This is not surprising given that, according to Geraldine June of the Office of Nutritional Products, Labeling, and Dietary Supplements at the Food and Drug Administration, there is no federal regulation of the word 'vegetarian' or 'vegan' in the United States.

Why Vegetarian Labels?

All of the nonprofit groups and the private vegetarian and vegan companies that we researched share a two-fold motivation, ethics and marketing. They advocate and

educate people about how vegetarianism or veganism ties in to animal rights/welfare, environmentalism, and/or human rights and human health. They also use the logos to capitalize on the expanding markets for vegetarian and vegan packaged foods. All of the groups and companies do not hesitate to make this marketing claim on their websites.

The nonprofit groups listed in the [accompanying chart](#) are very similar in that they consider themselves 'third-party certifiers.' This term is commonly understood to mean that the nonprofits consider themselves independent certifiers because they use their own sets of criteria to accredit companies, not the criteria that the companies themselves use, without personal or economic affiliation with the company seeking accreditation. They state that the fees they accept for their work cover the administrative costs of running the certification program and give the program legitimacy.

"There is no federal regulation of the word 'vegetarian' or 'vegan' in the United States."

A few private companies now display their own vegetarian and vegan icons on their food products. Edward & Sons Trading Company is an American vegetarian company with worldwide product distribution that allows other companies to use their logo to afford 'at a glance' identification of vegan products. Their symbol now also appears on vegan food products of several companies.

Two labels not listed in our Veggie Label Fact Table deserve mention. The Co-op UK charitable organization has two labels that it displays on some products in its own stores in the United Kingdom. "Suitable for Vegetarians" and "Suitable for Vegetarians & Vegans" appear on circular labels with two green leaves underneath the wording. The NOVA Key icon was proposed by Looking-Glass and VeggieGlobal, also UK charitable organizations, but it does not currently appear on any products. The groups hope that, if adopted, the NOVA Key (standing for Natural, or free of genetically-modified organisms (GMOs); Organic; Vegetarian/Vegan; and Animal testing), will enable consumers to clearly determine if a product is natural, organic, vegetarian or vegan, and produced without animal testing. A red "X" placed over a letter on the Key will indicate that a food product does not meet requirements in that area. The "V" in the NOVA key is dark green for vegetarian products but two-tone green for vegan products.

Here is a brief summary of the vegetarian and vegan food icons listed alphabetically in our [Veggie Label Fact Table](#).

Edward & Sons Trading Company, Inc., Vegan Mark

Edward & Sons debuted its vegan logo in 1999. Alison Cox, Vice President of Sales and Marketing, stated that Edward & Sons decided to extend their logo's use to other companies "in an effort to make vegan marks as useful to consumers as possible." Companies submit a list of ingredients for each product they wish to have approved, as well as any supplier letters guaranteeing that particular ingredients are vegan. Edward & Sons checks the submitted list of ingredients against the list of animal products and animal byproducts that the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has produced. Edward & Sons asks for a \$1 fee to use their logo on approved products, and applicants sign a legal agreement to adhere to the vegan standards as determined by Edward & Sons. Currently, Edward & Sons authorizes approximately five companies to use their vegan logo.

European Vegetarian Label

The European Vegetarian Label, which the European Vegetarian Union adopted in 1985, is licensed for use in more than 16 European countries. National vegetarian groups administer the label in their respective countries. At this time, the EVU label is displayed mostly on food products and in restaurants in Europe, although some products displaying the label may be exported to the United States.

The EVU label is a vegetarian label, not a vegan label. Therefore, foods containing egg and dairy ingredients may carry this label. However, eggs or egg products permitted in food products displaying this label must not be from caged hens. The only requirement for dairy products is that they must be free of animal enzymes. The EVU does not require that milk and milk products come from pastured (free-roaming and not caged) cows. All food products displaying the EVU label must be free of animal byproducts, such as gelatin and lanolin.

The six-page application for licensing rights to the EVU logo is the most comprehensive of all the icons considered in this report. Companies and restaurants compose a list of ingredients and additives in their food products, similar to the applications that other vegetarian and vegan food icons require. These companies and restaurants must list specific ingredients in descending order by amounts. Applicants must also consider a long list of additives and indicate, one by one, whether they are used and if they are of animal origin. Furthermore, applicants for use of the EVU label must respond to several pages of detailed questions regarding their products' ingredients and must declare each food product as vegan, lacto-ovo vegetarian, lacto-vegetarian, or ovo-vegetarian. If licensees should make ingredient changes in the food products that have been approved, they are required to inform the European group overseeing the symbol as stated in their trademark license agreement.

Licensing fees for use of the EVU vegetarian label vary from country to country. The EVU declined to reveal their fee schedule, citing their wish to allow national vegetarian groups "the possibility to set the fee according to the local situation." However, Renato Pichler, President of the EVU and the Swiss Vegetarian Union that is responsible for the label program, said that "the fee per product is cheaper for a whole product line as compared to that for a single product." The fee is also higher in countries where the label is well known.

According to Pichler, "About 95 percent of ingredient control is based on written specification and certificates by the companies and their suppliers." He points out that many food companies are already certified by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or follow Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) guidelines that address food safety issues, including food contamination. Although this control "doesn't replace our own, it helps to know that the production process is strictly regulated." The EVU member countries also consult with each other about questionable ingredients and get ingredient information from the quality control departments of some of the big companies using their label.

Natural Food Certifiers Vegan Symbol

Natural Food Certifiers, Inc., is a private company that Rabbi Reuven Flamer began in 1997 to offer organic, kosher, and vegan food certifications. According to the NFC website, their vegan certification standards mean that no animal, fish, milk, egg, or insect products or byproducts are in the certified foods, there has been "no co-mingling with the above mentioned products," and that there has not been any cross-contamination because of "kosher sanitation program protocols." To date, NFC has certified products of three U.S. companies, which are licensed to use the NFC vegan icon on their food packages.

NFC has a seven-page vegan certification application that involves submission of the certificates of analysis for each ingredient used and detailed product profile sheets. Compared with applications for the other vegan and vegetarian symbols, NFC requires much more information on food production methods and sanitation protocols. "Each product is assessed individually," Flamer said, although ingredient testing is not done "unless the product becomes suspect." Applicants are required to state whether animal-derived GMOs were used in the ingredients or if animal testing was done. Companies must list each processing aid and describe how it was used. NFC even requires details on the culinary steam system used during processing to further ensure that vegan products were not contaminated with non-vegan products. A written description or schematic product flow chart showing how vegan products are moved through the manufacturing plant from start to finish must also be submitted.

NATURAL PRODUCTS COMPANIES USE VARIED APPROACHES REGARDING VEGETARIAN AND VEGAN LABELS

Many private companies, both large and small, are following the vegetarian and vegan food symbol trend and are developing their own icons to use on their food products. The Vice President of Sales for natural snack products manufacturer Betty Lou's, Inc., told The VRG during a recent phone interview, "Why should we spend a lot of money to get certified by someone else when our own graphic artist can develop a logo that we can use on our products?"

Whole Foods Market, the largest chain of natural foods stores in the United States, has put the design of its own vegetarian and vegan food icons for Whole Foods products on its action list for this year, according to Rebecca Stuch in the Whole Foods Private Label Department. Their objective in displaying these icons is "to address questions and concerns so that shoppers can shop more quickly." Presently, 'vegetarian' is part of the name of three Whole Foods brand food products, and 'vegan' is part of the name of two. "We use these terms in situations where the primary selling feature is that the product is vegan or vegetarian," Stuch stated. The Whole Foods Market product line contains more than 400 vegetarian and vegan food products, although only "a few" actually display the terms on the packaging.

Wild Oats, another large chain of natural foods stores, does not have a specific vegan or vegetarian label. However, according to Wild Oats Customer Service Representative Kaz Barrett, "If a product is vegan, we will say so on the packaging. We evaluate every ingredient and sub-ingredient to ensure that there are no animal byproducts present or used in the processing."

Vegan Action Logo

Vegan Action took over the Vegan Certification and Standards Project that Hillary Morris started, modified the logo, and trademarked it in 2000. Initially, the nonprofit permitted free use of the logo on vegan products, but the growing demand for this icon and increasing administrative costs to run the program has prompted Vegan Action to require a fee based on the licensing company's annual revenue. However, Vegan Action will give a 10 percent discount to companies that exclusively market vegan products.

Vegan Action requires that companies seeking its vegan certification submit the following for each product: an ingredients list; a description of the processing and sanitizing methods used; supplier verification that bone char was not used to filter sugar; and, where applicable, information on animal testing of ingredients or finished product and information on animal-derived GMOs or genes used to manufacture

ingredients or finished products. Companies must assure Vegan Action that steps were taken to thoroughly clean machinery between vegan and non-vegan runs. Alanna Wiggins, Director of Operations at Vegan Action, said, "Because we allow shared machinery-which is a standard industry practice-products may theoretically have trace amounts of contaminants." Companies must report any ingredient changes in approved products to Vegan Action.

Vegan Action has certified more than 1,000 products from almost 100 companies, mostly American, the majority of which are food products.

Vegan Society Trademark

The Vegan Society, based in England, introduced its trademark for use on food labels in 1990. The Vegan Society trademark may be licensed to certifying companies for use on vegan products. The Society's sunflower icon is used by restaurants offering vegan meals. According to the [Vegan Society's website](#), a food product must be totally free of "animal involvement," which includes animal ingredients, animal testing, and animal-derived GMOs or animal genes, to be certified by the Vegan Society.

Companies are required to submit a product declaration form for each food product that they wish to have certified by the Vegan Society. Accompanying the application to use the trademark is an ingredient checklist categorizing more than 100 ingredients as animal products, animal-derived additives, and possibly animal-derived additives.

Sebastian Pender, the Business Development Officer of the Vegan Society, said that the Vegan Society will routinely contact a company's ingredient suppliers about the source of their ingredients. Although the Society does not regularly carry out on-site inspections, it may do so if "deemed necessary in a particular instance." The application does not require a company to declare its processing equipment to be free from cross-contamination with animal products, nor is the issue of cross-contamination mentioned in the Society's product guidelines. However, Pender points out that the Vegan Society "considers the case of cross-contamination on a case-by-case basis and, if necessary, carries out on-site inspections to ensure that the production methods of a new applicant are acceptable." Companies must report any ingredient changes in approved products to the Vegan Society.

The Vegan Society trademark is displayed on more than 4,000 products manufactured by approximately 250 companies, including a few American companies. Also, some foreign companies export products displaying this trademark to the United States.

Vegetarian Society of the UK Seedling Symbol

Established in 1969, the Vegetarian Society of the UK's seedling symbol currently appears on more than 2,000 product lines around the globe. According to VSUK Manager of Corporate Relations Vanessa Brown, approximately 90 percent of accreditations are awarded to UK-based companies. She estimates that fewer than 20 companies using the seedling symbol are based in the United States.

Products displaying this label have met the Society's criteria:

1. Free from animal flesh and all slaughterhouse byproducts, such as carcass fats
2. Not tested on animals
3. If the product contains eggs, only free-range eggs and egg products can be used. (Standards include a maximum flock size not exceeding 1,000 birds per hectare; poultry houses with an area of dry litter, perches for roosting, and sufficient natural light to make artificial light unnecessary; no debeaking; and no artificial yolk colorants.)
4. GMO-free
5. Free from cross-contamination with non-vegetarian products.

Brown stated the Society does not have criteria for milk or milk products, but this may change in the future.

The application to use this symbol requires that companies submit a signed ingredients list stating ingredient origins and including all ingredient data sheets "where possible." The trademark license agreement also requires applicants to inform the VSUK if there are ingredient changes. The Society conducts announced annual inspections of food plants and restaurants for quality assurance purposes. Brown said the organization does not have the legal right to conduct unannounced visits. During site visits, shared production lines are checked to ensure that "they have been fully cleaned down according to HACCP standards" before VSUK-approved products are prepared on them.

American Vegetarian Association Logo

According to the American Vegetarian Association (AVA) website, the AVA Certified Logo is "the recognized standard of vegetarian assurance." However, The VRG has not found this label on any vegan or vegetarian food products in stores. We have attempted to contact several people at AVA by telephone and e-mail for more information about their logo but have not been successful.

Unanswered Questions for Consumers and Companies

This information leaves consumers with many unanswered questions about the standards used to determine if a food product is indeed vegetarian or vegan. Can a company-submitted list of ingredients and supplier certificates be enough to assure what really is in a food product? Moreover, is there a food technologist or similarly qualified person checking the lists and determining if ingredients truly are non-animal derived? How far back in the supply line of those ingredients must we go to be sure that they are genuinely vegetarian or vegan? One example of a potentially problematic ingredient is cane sugar because some producers use a bone char filter.

Then, there are questions on the animal rights and animal welfare issues lurking within the vegetarian and vegan labeling issues. For example, if vegetarian groups state that eggs approved for use in a vegetarian product must be "cage-free," should the approved dairy products also be from antibiotic- and hormone-free pastured cows? These and similar points will be discussed further in reports on "animal welfare" food icons and organic food labeling in future issues of *Vegetarian Journal*.

What about the unanswered questions in consumers' minds upon seeing these different vegetarian and vegan icons on food products? Perhaps they will believe that the labels are federally regulated and trust them, even though there is no federal regulation of any 'vegetarian' or 'vegan' term. For that matter, it is unlikely that consumers will be able to distinguish labels that food companies place on the packages themselves from labels that outside parties evaluate and certify. Consumers may place more confidence in independent labels if they know for sure that they were third-party certified.

Whether people consider a vegetarian or vegan food icon as instilling confidence is a live question for food companies considering the investment of time in the application process and the investment of finances in certification. Some companies that we interviewed strongly doubted that a vegetarian or vegan symbol would significantly contribute to the retail value of a food product. In fact, consumers probably do not know if a vegetarian or vegan symbol on a food item is the food company's own or that of a third-party certifier. Vegetarian and vegan food labels may give the impression that all of these icons are federally regulated or third-party regulated, although the truth is that they are not.

Companies have several reasons to consider displaying vegetarian or vegan food icons on their food packages. When designing food labels, Bob Goldberg, Co-Founder and CEO of Earth Island Foods/Follow Your Heart, said that companies want "to communicate the key features of a product, prioritizing them in prominence based on our best guess as to what's the most important to the greatest number of people." At the same time, the companies want to present a smart-looking, uncluttered, and truthful package that will maximize their sales. "We are always trying to boil down

complex marketing issues into one word, a short phrase, or an eye-catching symbol," Seth Tibbott, owner of Turtle Island Foods, stated.

Vegetarians of Washington has been approached by several vegetarian food companies about the possibility of getting the group's seal of approval on their vegetarian and vegan food products. "As a group, we are considering it, but no final decision has been made," Stewart Rose, Vice President of the Seattle-based organization. "We understand the complexities involved in such a major undertaking and must determine if the risks, especially legal risks related to product liability, are not too great. Then, there are other important issues, including ones about how we should define 'vegetarian' and 'vegan,' how we'll verify ingredient sources, and if we'll accomplish on-site inspection. If the group decides to embark on the project, a statement such as, 'Meets the standards of the Vegetarians of Washington' would appear on food packages."

Food companies need to be concerned about their packages in our litigious society, where product liability issues can ruin a company that misrepresents a product on its label. This is true for terms that are regulated by the government as well as for terms that are not. Governmental regulations on certain labeling issues (e.g., GMOs) change, so Tibbott said it would be very risky for a company to say too much on its label.

Average consumers may not find the non-regulated terms 'vegetarian' or 'vegan' very helpful on labels because there are no universally agreed upon definitions for these terms. Kristie Kimmett, the Brand Manager for Yves Veggie Cuisine, said, "We do not identify vegetarian items as such because we have found, through consumer research, that the definition of 'vegetarian' varies widely among consumers." However, Yves does use Vegan Action's logo on some of its vegan products "for easy reference based on consumer need."

Jim Kinsinger, Corporate Director of Regulatory Compliance for the Hain Celestial Group, which owns more than 35 food brands, said, "There are so many different levels to the terms 'vegetarian' and 'vegan' for so many people that a vegetarian logo would not be very helpful to consumers in most cases. The cost of certification is also a factor. If there were a federal definition of these terms, we would be more likely to use a logo."

However, government regulation of these terms may not be desirable, either. The government could require, or fail to require, certain standards, dissatisfying consumers as well as food companies. Those really interested in buying vegetarian or vegan products usually know what to look for on the package. "The ingredient statements on our food packages are clear enough for most people, making a vegetarian or vegan logo unnecessary," Kinsinger stated. Using these terms helps to

raise awareness of vegetarianism and veganism, but if it means that a company has to clutter its packaging even more and spend a lot of money to do it, the company may choose not to seek accreditation. In fact, Goldberg said the lack of a "clear leader or two" among the various groups offering vegetarian and vegan icons was discouraging, so the company "decided against using one."

Goldberg also expressed concern over the "lack of the 'hurdle' level of integrity needed for an authentic accreditation" in the vegetarian and vegan symbols available now. Goldberg asserts that a proper audit, such as that done by Quality Assurance International of his company's certified organic products, requires that a company open its highly confidential data to the certifying agency. "That's a high risk venture that we're not willing to embark on with the groups or companies currently offering vegan icons because their relatively new icons are not yet backed by a solid reputation of trust built up only over time and through experience," Goldberg comments. It may be partly for this reason that The VRG could locate only one private company, Natural Food Certifiers, that does third-party vegan certification.

What Does This Mean to Consumers?

There is no uniformity in what vegetarian and vegan labels represent, and there is minimal regulation in the U.S. of how the approved food items are produced. (The Food Standards Agency of the UK, however, has recently established specific criteria for the terms 'vegetarian' and 'vegan' and, although not required by law, offers guidance to food manufacturers as the UK strives for greater consistency in food labeling.) Thus, the consumer needs to understand what is behind each certification to make conclusions about how meaningful the vegetarian and vegan food icons really are.

During our interviews, we discovered that on-site inspection is extremely rare; many groups say that it is difficult and not economically feasible. On-site inspection may assure consumers to a greater degree of the ingredient sources and also ensure that the risk of cross-contamination with non-vegetarian food products has been minimized or removed. Because very few companies can afford vegetarian- or vegan-only equipment, they 'rent' time on machines used to manufacture non-vegetarian and non-vegan products.

nSpired Natural Foods, the producer of Tropical Source vegan chocolate bars, is one example. Liz Scatena of nSpired said the bars manufactured in Israel are done on a dedicated dairy-free line "because it's the only manufacturer we know of that has a dairy-free line. Tropical Source is large enough but many of our other brands simply are not, so we must run them on equipment where dairy-containing products have been processed."

The certifying nonprofits have expressed concern over the issue of cross-contamination. This is why they require that some 'reasonable' efforts be made to thoroughly clean equipment between runs of vegetarian/vegan foods and non-vegetarian/non-vegan foods. More than reasonable precautions taken on a company-by-company basis could boost the confidence of all consumers about what really is in the foods that they are eating. Sanitation protocols similar to those used by companies that receive kosher certification, the "Prevention Practice Standard" of the government-regulated organic program (section 205.272 of the National Organic Program) that controls commingling and contact with non-organic substances, or a HACCP protocol would make vegetarian and vegan certification more meaningful to consumers, assuring them that residual contamination has been minimized.

The recent U.S. law requiring companies to list common allergens, such as dairy and egg products, in their foods will help to inform consumers about what really are the 'hidden' ingredients in certain food items. Exactly how this law is implemented and enforced is yet to be seen. The VRG will be covering the issue in more detail in a future *Vegetarian Journal*.

It was interesting to notice that a random look at several of the approved products and company websites did not display the licensed symbols. Sometimes, food packaging is printed in large quantities and introducing changes after printing can be very costly. Alanna Wiggins of Vegan Action pointed out that approved companies may market the label in different ways, for example, through package inserts or magazine ads.

Consumers should remember that, in the U.S., companies are not legally required to use the terms 'vegetarian' and 'vegan' in certain ways, and many companies do not use these terms at all. Furthermore, companies do not need to have an independent third-party certify their food products as vegetarian or vegan. Among the vegetarian and vegan logos discussed in this article, each follows its own standards. All are only minimally regulated. Companies that are contemplating seeking certification or designing their own icons need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of vegetarian and vegan food icons as discussed in this report.

This article is the first in a series of food labeling research projects undertaken by The VRG. In later issues of *Vegetarian Journal* will be reports on animal welfare food icons, religious food labels, and the USDA Certified Organic label. The VRG looks forward to receiving readers' comments on food labels.

Vegetarian Resource Group Certification Survey

In an informal, non-random survey, The VRG mailed a questionnaire to members of animal rights, vegetarian, and consumer groups, as well as as well as individuals who

have purchased vegetarian books. Of an initial 218 returned surveys, 123 respondents said they are looking for a vegetarian certification on a package and 133 for a vegan one. We asked which certifying agencies/symbols are important to them but did not give choices. Of the 218 respondents, one looked for a V with a circle and one for "vegan certified." There were over 60 different choices, with most types being selected by one to five people. The clear leaders were "did not specify" at 45 people and USDA organic/organic at 24. Nine people wrote in the word "vegan" and four wrote "vegetarian."

Vegetarian Label Fact Table						
Graphic Logo						
Label Standard	Edward & Sons Trading Company, Inc.	European Vegetarian Union Vegetarian Label	Natural Food Certifiers, Inc.	Vegan Action Logo	Vegan Society Trademark	Vegetarian Society of the UK Seedling Symbol
Ingredient verification beyond company's signed list	N/A	As needed	If warranted	As needed	Routinely done	As needed
On-site Inspection	No	Frequently unannounced	Yes	If warranted	If warranted	Announced
Fees (based on annual revenue and/or number of products)	Nominal (\$1.00)	Yes	Yes, if only vegan certified. No, if with kosher or organic certification.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Meat, fish, fowl, or animal slaughter byproducts used in foods or manufacturing	No	No	No	No	No	No
Eggs or egg products permitted	No	No eggs from caged hens permitted	No	No	No	No eggs from caged hens permitted
Milk or milk products permitted	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

Animal-derived GMO products permitted	No	No	No	No	No	No
Contaminated equipment safeguards taken	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

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