

# Jim's Healthy Grocery Shopping Tips

by Jim Lynn

## Buying Ground Beef

When buying ground beef, opt to buy a whole roast and ask the butcher to grind it for you. If the butcher points you to packaged ground beef in the meat counter, tell him the reason you want him to grind your selected roast is that you want to know the beef you are eating came from one cow and not 50 others as well. If the grocer refuses (most will be happy to grind the roast for you), put the roast back in the meat case and move on. Also, watch the butcher to make sure he actually grinds your roast and doesn't trick you into taking a different package of ground beef that you assume came from your roast.

If you have a machine at home that grinds meat, you may choose to grind the roast yourself. Sure it takes more time, but we are speaking here of your family's health.

Typical branded ground beef (and hamburgers from a fast food restaurant) will contain the meat from as many as 50 cows. Buying store branded and fast food chain ground beef patties increases the chances of buying contaminated or diseased meat.



## Buying Deli Meats

In a Word...DON'T! All processed meats (including bacon and sausage) contain a nasty ingredient called "sodium nitrite" and/or "sodium nitrate." These are highly suspected carcinogenic food additives. Many deli meats also contain monosodium glutamate (MSG). MSG is an excitotoxin, which kills brain, and organ cells.

A good alternative is to make your own lunchmeats from left over roasts and chickens. Simply slice narrow slices of the meat and add to sandwiches. Again, this takes more time, but good health, (not time) is what you want your family to have more of.

## Buying Fresh Chicken

Give the package a little squeeze. Look for signs of ice along the wings, backs or edges? Freezing causes a breakdown in protein, loss of natural juices, and reduced tenderness. Once frozen, the bones and nearby meat may turn an unappetizing dark color when cooked. Look at the ends of the bones. Are they pink or are they turning gray? Generally, the pinker the bone ends are, the fresher the chicken.

## Buying Fresh Fish

The Flesh must be firm, elastic, and not separating from the bones. In buying fillets and steaks, look for a fresh-cut appearance and color that resembles freshly dressed fish. Odor should be fresh and mild. A fish just taken from the water has practically no "fish" odor. Eyes are bright, clear, transparent, full, and often protruding. Gills are red and free from slime. Skin is shiny and with color that has not faded. As the fish begins to spoil, the eyes look cloudy and sunken.

## Buying Frozen Fish

Make sure the flesh is solidly frozen. There should be no discoloration, brownish tinge or white cottony appearance. Odor is not evident or is slight. The wrapping in which the fish is packaged should be moisture-vapor-proof, with little or no air space between the fish and the wrapping and no damage to the package. Glazing of ice is used to protect salmon, and halibut steaks or whole fish frozen in the round or dressed fish against drying out.

## Judging Watermelons

Watermelons rank high on the "eat more of" list of healthy foods. The trick is knowing how to pick a ripened melon from one that is not ripened. It will take trial and error, but savvy shoppers know to use the "thump test" to judge ripeness.

To differentiate the difference between the thumping sound of an unripe and ripened watermelon, thump your chest on your breastplate bone with your middle two fingers. Next thump your stomach. The melon you want to buy is the sound somewhere in between. A ripe melon will have a 'ping' when thumped. An overripe watermelon will 'thud.'



Gardeners can tell when a watermelon is ready by checking the tendril, or curl, that connects the melon to the vine. If it's still green, the watermelon is very likely not ripe. If it is brown and dead, the fruit may be ripe.

## Judging Cantaloupe and Honeydew Melons

The best thing you can do is smell. Ripe cantaloupe smells very sweet and nice. Sniffing out the most aromatic one is the smartest way to pick a cantaloupe or honeydew. If honeydew is beige-skinned with distinct green veins it's probably not ripe yet. If it has a pale yellow color with bright, lemon-colored areas you probably have found a good one. Cantaloupes are unripe when the skin beneath the textured "web" is green. Cantaloupes are ripe when orange or gold. A good melon is firm, but not rock hard. It yields very slightly to pressure but has no soft spots.

## Buying Sweet Corn on the Cob

Always ask the produce manager where the corn originated. This will help determine whether you want it. Be picky... Tear back the leaves of each ear just a bit. Look for full ears. Kernels should be full all the way to the tip. Check for signs of worms at the tip of the ear. Smell the exposed portion of corn. It should smell sweet. Pinch a kernel from each ear with a fingernail and taste the corn pulp. It should be sweet to the taste.



## Buying Asparagus

You want fresh tender asparagus. Sniff the asparagus if it has a strange or musty smell it is not fresh. Also look at the ends of the asparagus. The ends should be moist and free of mold. If the ends are exposed to air in the store then bring them home and cut about 1 inch off the bottom. Then stand the spears up in about 1 inch of water and store in the refrigerator for up to three days. When buying **asparagus**: Look for firm, bright spears with closed tips.

## Buying Fruit and Produce Grown Outside the U.S.A.

Food handling laws and laws regulating the use of pesticides and herbicides in foreign countries usually are not as stringent as ours. To be safe, buy only fruit and produce grown in the U.S.A. South American countries are especially known for their use of DDT on fruits and produce.

Many kinds of fruits are seasonal, which means you may have to go without fresh fruit for a few months if you are committed to buying only USA grown fruit, a good alternative is to freeze or can fruit during their season, so you can have them later during the off season.

Look for the PLU number on each piece of fruit you choose. The reason? Customers and produce managers can mix and place different PLU's in the same bin.

## How to Tell the Difference Between Conventional, Organic and GMO Produce

The key is the PLU sticker found on each piece of fruit. All conventional produce is labeled with a 4 digit PLU. The first number will always be either a 3 or 4. For example a conventional Red Delicious Apple will be 3016 or 4016. All Organic produce has a five digit PLU. The first number will always be a 9. So the PLU of an organic Red Delicious Apple will always be 94016.

All Genetically Modified produce or GMO produce also has a five digit PLU. The first number of GMO produce will always be an 8. So the PLU of a GMO Red Delicious Apple will always be 84016.



## **Buying “Best Used By” Dated Food**

If the food item comes with a best used by date, select your item from the bottom of the stack or from behind (if on a shelf) to get the freshest foods. Read the dates. Stockers are taught to rotate the oldest food items to the front of shelves and to the top of the stack. Don't be shy about displacing food items to get to the freshest products.

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