

Supermarket chain's stars guide the way to nutritious eating

By Emily Schwab, Globe Correspondent | November 8, 2006

WEST PEABODY -- Ever wish that you could know, at a glance, whether the food you see on the shelves is actually good for you? Hannaford Bros. Co., the supermarket chain started in 1883 as a small produce shop in Portland, Maine, -- has recently introduced its Guiding Stars nutritional labeling system, which promises to make everything much more clear.

Now many products' price labels are marked with yellow stars: one, two, or three, the more stars the better. Products with one star, according to the store's promotional brochure, demonstrate "good nutritional value." Those with two, "better," and with three, "best." As one might expect, the produce section is a veritable field of stars and the snack aisle, not so much. But most major categories of foods from cereals to meats have starred representatives. The important thing, says company spokeswoman Caren Epstein, is "not comparing an apple and a granola bar." Three stars in the meat section (boneless skinless chicken breast) does not exactly equal three stars in the dairy aisle (skim milk) as the foods' inherent characteristics are so different.

The program started when Hannaford brought together a panel of nutrition experts more than two years ago to create guidelines. They evaluated grocery items based on their nutritional labels and foods like vegetables and fish on information in the US Department of Agriculture's national nutrient database. Jeffrey Blumberg, professor of nutrition at Tufts University and a member of the panel, says, "We couldn't put all the foods in one basket."

The group determined that an item would be given stars if it had more vitamins, minerals, fiber, and whole grains, and less saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, and added sugars. For example, oranges have three stars; grapes have two; and coconuts, only one. However, only 23 percent of the 27,000 foods analyzed have stars. The ones without are either not as nutritious or not rated, typically because they do not contribute significantly to caloric intake (like coffees and teas).

Though Guiding Stars are now on products, the seven-member advisory board is not done. Blumberg and his colleagues, from around the country, still want to someday evaluate oils and other fats but they have to wait for Nutrition Facts labels to catch up with them. Today these labels do not always separate unsaturated and saturated fats or omega-3 fatty acids from trans fats. There are no loopholes. Blumberg calls this the "jelly bean rule," imposed to make sure that a food containing mostly sugar cannot gain stars simply by being beefed up with fiber or vitamins. "We try to allow foods to be recognized as a sum total of their parts," explains the professor.

On a recent visit to the Hannaford Bros. store in West Peabody, many goods without stars were still going from shelves to carts, but shoppers were also spending time looking at the starred tags and comparing brands. "Now that we've made it easy," wonders Blumberg, "will people change their behavior?"

The jury's still out, but consumers who want better shopping and eating habits only have to follow the stars.

Hannaford Bros. locations include Easton, Hudson, Kingston, Lowell, Norwell, Norwood, North Quincy, Waltham, and West Peabody. For more information, go to <http://www.hannafordguidingstars.com/>.