

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Our health and welfare don't depend upon the wide choices available to us at the grocery stores. It's not vitally necessary to us to be able to pick from fourteen or sixteen different kinds of laundry soap, twelve different brands of canned string beans, six varieties of vinegar or mustard, eight or ten makers of baked beans.

Almost any detergent or laundry soap will wash our clothes clean. There are but three ways to prepare string beans for canning: you can french them, cut them in pieces about an inch long; or leave them whole.

Similarly, there are three ways to fix corn for freezing or canning: creamed, whole kernel, or on the cob.

Vinegar comes in many forms: white, cider, wine, tarragon, and so forth. Does it matter who bottles it? Mustard is mustard; your favorite brand is flavored with sugar, salt and certain spices you're accustomed to tasting in mustard. Basically, however, mustard could be sold plain and the consumer could add flavoring and come up with her own varieties.

For really fine baked beans, none are better than those you make yourself from packaged dried beans, lots of water, a little molasses, and seasoning. It's not economical for a small family, of course, unless yours is inordinately fond of baked beans.

However, one brand of baked California pea beans in vegetarian sauce tastes very much like any other brand. If you prefer yours with salt pork, that's fine. Two choices should be enough. The same is true of kidney beans, isn't it? Do we need all those alternatives?

Next time you're at the grocery store, take a quick inventory at the bread counter. There's dark and light rye, whole wheat, cracked wheat, honey, wheat germ, corn meal, oat meal, and pumpernickel. There's thin-sliced and regular sliced. They're long skinny loaves, round loaves, short fat loaves, sandwich loaves, large and small sizes. There's even white bread.

We pay, pay dearly, for all those choices.

Have you ever tried to buy some plain ordinary unsliced bread? It's rarely available, one of the reasons I bake my own.

Consider all the different kinds of cookies and crackers, the shelves of candies, the choices in paper products.

Is all this variety really necessary? Wouldn't life be simpler, just as satisfying - and prices lower - if there weren't quite so many?

Competition in our economic system is supposed to keep prices down; I don't think it operates any more because most of us think of luxuries as necessities - and when we don't and when there is consumer resistance to high prices, we pay them anyhow through government price supports.

There's no way under heaven's blue sky we can legislate lower prices without legislating wages as well; historically, the results of that have been galloping inflation when the controls are removed.

Now some supermarkets in Chicago, Milwaukee, Boston and Hyannis - are testing a new way to help consumers save money. A limited selection of no-name brands are offered at the Star Market, a chain owned by the Jewel Companies.

These are household goods and food products packaged in plain black and white boxes or cans. The selection is small at present, but if the experiment proves popular with the public, it will undoubtedly be larger.

One reason the total at the check-out counter seems to increase week-by-week is that the cost of advertising products we buy is built into the prices we pay.

From shoe polish to hair spray, soup to floor wax, cold remedies to automobiles, the advertising dollar is recovered by the manufacturer in the retail price marked on each item.

We don't eat these pretty colors on brand name packages, nor can we benefit from the enticing ads on radio and TV and in newspapers. On no-name brands there are no pretty pictures, no bright colors, no eye-catching wrappers.

There are some eye-catching prices, however; they're 30% to 40% lower than those on name brands.

The quality of the product in the no-name packages, says the store, may be lower than in name brands. That is, canned fruit will be packed in light, instead of heavy syrup. Those of us who are weight-conscious or who, for health reasons, must limit sugar intake will be glad to get fruit packed in light syrup.

Macaroni is pretty much macaroni. A comparison of the nutrition information between the two types reveals precisely the same fool value and enrichment in both.

Canned vegetables, like peas, will probably not be of uniform size. They don't come in uniform sizes in the pod, either. All food products meet standards set by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, however, and that's what we want, isn't it? Good food.

Facial tissues aren't as soft and fluffy as name-brands and contain no perfumes (to which some of us are allergic anyhow), but they're adequate for every-day use. In case of a respiratory infection and a tender nose, you could invest in a box of softer tissues for the duration of the cold.

This is a good time of year to buy canned corn, for instance. Fresh corn -- isn't it delicious? -- has been available at roadside stands and on vegetable counters everywhere. But the season is a short one, and there's a long cold winter ahead. This might be a good chance to stock up on a supply.

Last week, among other no-name brand items, the following were available: elbow macaroni, tomato juice, canned corn, facial tissues, and corn flakes.

When available, you'll save 43 cents on a bag of flour, 15 cents on a pound of spaghetti, 21 cents on a jar of peanut butter, and 11 cents on a box of facial tissues.

Savings like these should bring customers flocking.

It will be satisfying if the small area of the market now devoted to no-name brands is expanded during coming months. That will happen if demand for these products grows.

Here's our opportunity to prove we're not influenced by advertising and fancy packaging, that we're interested in getting the best value for our food dollars, and are not pawns of Madison Avenue.

The no-name brand counter is going to be my first stop every time I shop for groceries. I like the idea of getting what I'm paying for instead of supporting the advertising industry.

How about you?