



Cover: AI-generated illustration — not a photograph of any real product.

The Middle Path

A Field Guide to Reading a Food Package

Weighing health, carbon, and cost without pretending you can see what you can't.

From **Aware of My Food** — guided by Maria Luna Garcia, a fictional, AI-assisted character.
No medical, nutrition, or environmental advice; never tells you what to buy.

Why a middle path

Most food advice pulls you toward one extreme: buy the cheapest, buy the "healthiest," buy the "greenest." Each of those tells you to maximize one thing and stop looking at the rest. The middle path is the opposite habit — holding three costs in view at once, and choosing your own balance on purpose.

The honest catch, and the whole reason this guide exists: standing at a shelf, you can usually verify only **one** of those three costs. This guide will not hide that from you. It will show you which cost you can actually see, which one is only a claim, and which one is mostly unknown — so the trade you make is a real decision instead of a guess dressed up as a fact.

The reading tool: four labels

Before the three costs, one habit. Give every claim you meet — on the package, and in your own head — one of four labels. They are editorial labels, not regulatory categories. They are the single most useful thing in this guide.

- **Verified** — an appropriate, accessible source directly supports the specific claim.
- **Reported** — a named source said it; it is not independently confirmed. The attribution stays attached.
- **Inferred** — documented context supports a reasoned estimate. It is still an estimate.
- **Unknown** — the evidence is absent, out of reach, conflicting, or too weak. Unknown is not a blank to fill in.

Most of what a package tells you is **Reported**. Almost nothing on it is **Verified** by anyone but the seller. Naming that is not cynicism — it is just accuracy.

Cost 1 — Health: the cost to your body

What you can usually see: the ingredient list, and on most packaged foods the required nutrition facts. Those are a real starting point.

What stays Unknown at the shelf: how a food fits your body, your week, and your situation. A panel is a fact about the product; it is not a verdict about you. A front-of-pack claim ("supports...", "good source of...") is **Reported** until you check the basis behind it.

The middle-path question: What can I actually read here, and what am I assuming?

This guide stops at the label on purpose. Whether a food is right for your health is a question for you and, where it matters, a qualified professional — not a wrapper and not this page.

Cost 2 — Carbon: the cost to the living world

This is the axis where confident claims are least supported. A picture of a field, a leaf on the wrapper, or the word "eco-friendly" does not establish a footprint.

What you can sometimes see: a specific, qualified claim tied to a named program or a stated method ("X% recycled content," a certification that says what it certified).

What stays Unknown at the shelf: the actual emissions behind most products, which are rarely disclosed in any checkable form.

The middle-path question: Does this claim say what was measured — or does it just feel green?

A useful rule from the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's guidance for marketers: a broad, unqualified environmental claim is hard to substantiate, and a seal that does not say what it certified can mislead. So on your side of the shelf: a green claim with no stated basis is **Unknown**, not **Verified**. (Source: FTC, Environmental Claims: Summary of the Green Guides.)

Cost 3 — Cost: the price you pay

This is the honest one. Of the three, financial cost is the one you can most often actually **Verify** at the shelf.

What you can usually see: the price — and, where it is posted, the **unit price** (per ounce, per 100 g, per item), which lets you compare across package sizes instead of being fooled by them.

What stays Inferred or Unknown: the fuller cost — how much you will waste, how long it lasts, the cost per actual use. Those are reasoned estimates, not facts on the tag.

The middle-path question: Am I comparing price, or unit price and likely waste?

The 60-second shelf method

A repeatable routine you can run on any product:

- 1 Read one thing on health.** One fact from the panel or ingredients — and name one thing you are assuming.
- 2 Judge one carbon claim.** If there is an environmental claim, ask whether it states what was measured. If it does not, mark it **Unknown**.
- 3 Compare unit price, not package price.** Then guess, honestly, how much you will use before it is gone.
- 4 Choose your balance — on purpose.** Which cost matters most for this purchase, today? Pick it knowing which of the three you were mostly guessing about.

That is the whole method. The point is not a score at the end. The point is that you decided with clear eyes about what you could and couldn't see.

A worked example (the reasoning, not a real product)

Nothing below is a claim about any real brand — it is a walkthrough of the method. Suppose you are holding a jar of pasta sauce.

- The label reads "Product of Italy." That is a **Reported** origin claim about a country. It is not the farm, the region, or the route — those stay **Unknown**. (It also may or may not be a required declaration; country-of-origin rules cover only certain foods.)
- A leaf icon and the word "natural" appear near the logo. With no stated basis, that carbon/quality impression is **Unknown** — do not upgrade it to Verified in your head.
- The nutrition panel and ingredient list are printed and readable — **Verified** facts about the product's contents, though not a verdict about your diet.
- The shelf tag shows \$4.29, and the unit price reads \$0.27/oz next to a store-brand jar at \$0.19/oz. Those prices are **Verified**. Whether the pricier jar is "worth it" depends on your own weighting — that judgment is yours, not a fact on the tag.

Same jar, four different kinds of certainty. The middle path is choosing while seeing them for what they are.

What to do with an Unknown

Nothing. That is the honest answer, and it is allowed. An Unknown is a first-class result, not a gap to paper over with a guess. You can still buy the food. You can still love it. You are simply declining to pretend you know something you don't — which, over a lifetime of small choices, is its own quiet discipline.

Where you can check things yourself

These are real, free, official self-service tools — for when you want to move a claim from Reported toward Verified on your own:

- **Unit pricing** — posted on many shelf tags; the fastest real verification you have.
- **USDA FSIS Meat, Poultry & Egg Product Inspection Directory** — for meat and poultry, the establishment ("EST") number printed near the USDA inspection mark identifies the actual inspected plant.
- **USDA Organic INTEGRITY Database** — check whether a named operation is genuinely certified organic, by which certifier, for which products.

- **openFDA food enforcement / FDA & FSIS recall pages** — search recall history. A no result is never proof of safety; it only means no matching record was found.
- **FTC "Green Guides"** — the standard by which a broad "eco" claim is judged, so you can judge it too.

A barcode alone does not map to any of these — it identifies a product type, not the package in your hand, and not its journey.

The promise, and its limit

Follow the evidence. Honor the unseen. This guide organizes a way of thinking; it does not audit a supply chain, measure a footprint, or assess a food's effect on your health.

Maria Luna Garcia is a fictional, AI-assisted character. If this guide ever gets something wrong, the correction is published openly at awareofmyfood.com/corrections, with the original wording kept visible. Found an error, or a source we should read? awareofmyfood@gmail.com.

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