



“Natural Flavors”: What’s Really Behind the Label?

When you see “*natural flavors*” listed on a food label, it might conjure up images of fresh fruit, herbs, or spices. But the truth is far less appetizing, and far less *natural* than you might think.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), there’s no clear, legally binding definition of what makes a flavor “natural.” It loosely describes natural flavors as “substances derived from plant or animal sources, such as fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood, or even yeast, that are used primarily for flavor rather than nutrition.” However, the agency doesn’t regulate how those substances are processed once they’re extracted. That’s where things get murky.

After that initial extraction, natural flavors can be heavily refined, altered, or combined with synthetic chemicals to stabilize them, enhance shelf life, or modify taste. In other words, a “natural” flavor might begin with something found in nature, but by the time it reaches your soda, yogurt, or snack bar, it’s gone through just as much lab work as any artificial flavor.

In fact, both natural and artificial flavors are created by the same flavor chemists using similar industrial processes. The main difference is simply the *source material*: natural flavors must start from something “natural,” while artificial flavors begin with man-made compounds. The end products, though, are often nearly identical.

Even more concerning, companies don’t have to disclose what’s actually in their natural flavor blends. These mixtures can contain dozens or even hundreds of individual chemicals, solvents, or preservatives. In fact, the term “natural flavor” has become a kind of regulatory loophole that sounds wholesome but offers no transparency.

So what can you do? If you want to avoid these hidden additives:

- **Read ingredient lists carefully:** Choose products with real, recognizable ingredients like herbs, fruit extracts, or spices instead of vague “natural flavors.”
- **Seek transparency:** Support brands that clearly disclose their flavor sources or use simple, whole-food ingredients.
- **Cook and flavor at home:** Use fresh herbs, citrus zest, or natural extracts to control what goes into your food.

Next time you read “natural flavors” on a label, remember: *natural* doesn’t necessarily mean *pure*, *healthy*, or *simple*. It’s just marketing language, and a reminder that sometimes, “natural” is anything but.

References

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service. (2020, March 20). *Policy Memo 11-1: Use of Natural Flavors*. National Organic Program. Retrieved from <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/NOP-PM-11-1-NaturalFlavors.pdf>

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2018, October 22). *Use of the Term “Natural” on Food Labeling*. Retrieved from <https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-food-labeling-and-critical-foods/use-term-natural-food-labeling>

Truly Natural Yogurt Parfait



Parfaits often contain yogurt and granola that have vague “natural flavors” but you can make your own version that’s fresher, cleaner, and more satisfying. This recipe uses real fruit and an easy 15-minute granola you’ll want to keep on hand all week!

Ingredients (serves 2):

Yogurt Base:

- 1 cup plain whole milk, Greek, or plant-based plain yogurt

Fruit Layer:

- ½ cup fresh strawberries, sliced
- ½ cup fresh blueberries (or any other berry)
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice (optional)

Homemade Granola:

- 1 cup old-fashioned rolled oats
- 2 tablespoons honey or maple syrup
- 1 tablespoon melted coconut oil or olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- Pinch of salt
- *Optional:* 2 tablespoons chopped nuts or seeds (almonds, walnuts, sunflower seeds)

Instructions

- 1. Make the granola:** Preheat oven to 350°F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a bowl, mix oats, cinnamon, salt, and nuts (if using). Stir in honey and oil until everything is lightly coated. Spread evenly on the baking sheet and bake for 12-15 minutes, stirring once halfway through, until golden brown. Let cool completely, it will crisp up as it cools.
- 2. Prepare the fruit:** In a small bowl, combine berries, lemon juice, and honey. Let sit for about 5 minutes to release natural juices.
- 3. Flavor the yogurt:** Stir honey or maple syrup (if using) into the yogurt until smooth and creamy.
- 4. Assemble the parfait:** Layer yogurt, granola, and fruit in glasses or bowls. Repeat for extra layers if desired. Garnish with a few fresh berries or a drizzle of honey.