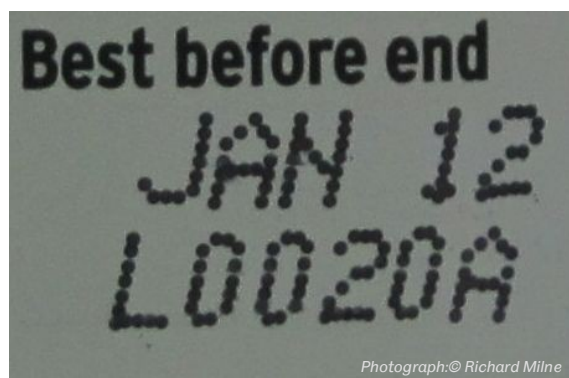


WP 4a: Consumer Understanding of Date Labels

This project focuses on the construction and communication of food risk through expiry date labelling. Date labelling is part of a system that controls the safety and quality of food from the moment of manufacture to the point of sale. Initially introduced in the 1970s as a response to consumer concerns regarding food quality, date labelling came to be defined primarily in terms of food safety in the 1980s.

Background, Aims and Methods:

- In the last few years, concerns have been repeatedly expressed by government, food safety regulators and the media that the system for date labelling has broken down and that consumers are unable to use date labels effectively to establish the **quality and safety** of food.
- Consumers are frequently described as **ignorant or irrational**, contributing to food waste by over-reacting to 'best before' dates, while older consumers put their health at risk by eating out of date food that may harbour food-borne diseases such as *Listeria*.
- This project aims to explore contemporary concerns about date labelling, focusing particularly on **how older consumers make sense** of date labels.
- The research draws on **focus groups** with consumers, **interviews** with the food industry and food regulators, and **documentary research** on the history of date labels.



Findings:

- Though date labels are divided into '**use-by**' and '**best-before**' dates, they are almost universally referred to as '**sell-by**' dates which were phased out in the early 1990s.
- Date labels are often **mistrusted** because they are seen to reflect the interests of the food industry rather than consumers.
- Such mistrust is rationalised by reference to products that are still edible beyond the recommended date because of the incorporation of a **safety margin**.
- The use of labels is affected by people's confidence and concerns about the food industry, including the history of recent '**food scares**', as well as by their individual biographies and dispositions towards food.
- Consumers often use products after their expiration date, relying on their own judgements of **taste, smell and appearance** (though this varies by product, with most concern expressed about eggs, fish and chicken).
- The use of date labels in the home is discussed less than their use when **shopping** (except for people who describe themselves as 'fussy' or 'worried' about food).
- People are more likely to use labels when they are preparing food for **friends and relatives** than just for themselves.
- Date labels are used to sort **frozen food or food in cupboards** which may have been stored for a long time.
- The use of date labels among **the over 60s** reflects physical, social and economic changes associated with aging.
- The **size of labelling** creates problems for people with poorer eyesight.
- People use date labels while shopping to buy the **freshest food** that will last longest, especially among those who **shop infrequently**, becoming more important as physical mobility and car use decrease.
- If products are stored for longer between shopping trips, a lack of attention to date labels in the home may lead to an **increased risk of food poisoning**.



Key Publications:

Milne, R. (2012) Food Safety and Consumer Practices among the over-60s: Results of a Focus Group Study. *Critical Public Health*, in press.

Milne, R., Wenzer, J., Brembeck, H. and Brodin, M. (2011) Fraught Cuisine: Food Scares and the Modulation of Food Anxieties. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 12 (2): 177-192.