Future of Food

Trust in food.

Would you like some facts with that?

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Future of Food series
Issue 10

Published March 2026

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Trust in food.
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Seen the latest fad diet? Following a new food guru? Confused about what to eat? You're not alone. Nutritional advice is the biggest source of misinformation online. For consumers, it's a mess of conflicting fads and facts. For producers, it's walking a minefield of science and marketing hype. How can Kiwi producers build trust in a world of nutritional noise?

Opportunity: Recent updates to the US food guidelines reinforce the growth in the 'real food' movement. Kiwi producers can cut through the noise by providing scientifically based evidence of nutritional value and sustainable production - and build long term trust in New Zealand food.

Threat: Consumers are demanding detailed nutritional information - but are simultaneously confused about who to trust and what to think. Under pressure to claim nutritional benefits New Zealand producers may fake the science or chase dangerous fads - and undermine New Zealand's reputation for safety and integrity and trigger regulatory censure.

Key points:

Trust in food information is at all-time low; diet and nutrition advice is the largest category of misinformation on social media.

Disagreements among experts and changing 'official' advice creates uncertainty.

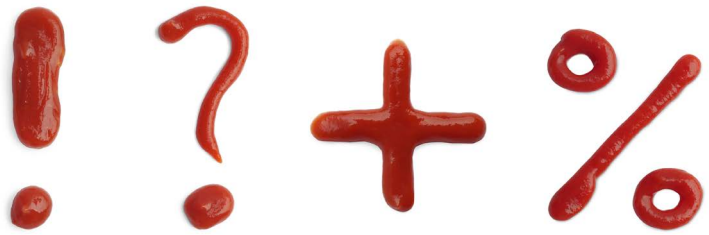
Greenwashing and overclaims by manufacturers add to confusion.

Recent updates to the US food guidelines suggest an opportunity for 'real food' marketing and story-telling.

New Zealand can build on its reputation for safety and integrity with a renewed determination to make credible, evidence-based nutritional and sustainability claims.

Information and expertise are readily available but the lack of curiosity and anti-intellectual 'can do' attitude holds us back.

Real food requires real science and real expenditure.



When the US government released new dietary guidelines last year, it turned the food pyramid upside down.

Out went grains, breads and carbohydrates and in came meat, full-cream dairy and healthy fats. “For decades we’ve been misled,” said Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert Kennedy Junior. “Our nation is... moving past decades of unhealthy eating and rebuilding a food culture rooted in health, science, transparency, and personal responsibility.”

Animal protein is now top of the pops. Fruit and vegetables, while still high in the list, have their recommended daily servings reduced.[1]

Puzzled by the change? You’re not alone. Fewer than half of Americans strongly trust food and nutrition science. The International Food Information Council 2024 Spotlight Survey finds consumers report confusion (43%), frustration (33%), doubt (30%), and stress (22%) about food information.[2]

It doesn’t help that brand marketers muddy the waters with ambiguous claims - as shown so well by this Snickers spoof.* Packaging with terms like protein-plus, reduced carbs, and for good gut health dominates supermarket shelves.

Social media is worse, filled with dubious advice and self-appointed gurus. A recent review of 28 studies, spanning more than 2 million Instagram posts, 1,000 YouTube videos and 46,000 tweets, concluded that ‘nutritional advice’ is the largest category of health misinformation.[3] A Deakin University study of high-follower Instagram accounts found 45% of posts contained inaccurate nutrition information and 9 in 10 posts were low quality.[4]

Influencers love their crazy diets. Drinking your own urine yet?[5]

Even academic journals are struggling. The volume of nutritional studies has exploded, with a corresponding fall in quality. The number of research-studies indexed by Clarivate’s Web of Science rose from 1.71 million in 2015 to 2.53 million in 2024. According to an expert quoted in The Guardian, the publishing system is “kind of broken and unsustainable,” with incentives favouring quantity over quality.[6]

It’s almost as if whoever pays the piper calls the tune. A review in 2021 found that “industry-sponsored nutrition research … almost invariably produces results that confirm the benefits or lack of harm of the sponsor’s products.”[7]

Indeed, a British Medical Journal article has just found that “a powerful, industry funded group is playing an “outsized role” in steering the development of [the] new US dietary guidelines and must have its influence curbed to protect public health.”[8]

Flooded with conflicting messages about food and nutrition, consumers are right to be sceptical and confused. What’s good to eat? What’s to be avoided? Who says? And will it change again? And again?

For New Zealand food producers, chasing nutritional trends is equally challenging. What’s worth investing in? Can it be defended? And will it sustain?

How can New Zealand build a credible food story in such an information soup?

*https://www.youtube.com/shorts/4uyo9NnX_bU

Maybe it's worth asking first: who cares?

Who cares wins

Maybe it's worth asking first: who cares? New Zealand's ambition is to double primary exports by 2035. That growth must come from somewhere. Why not junk food and dubious claims? Ultra-processed food (UPF), despite the overwhelming health case against it,[9] continues to defy gravity as category growth machines.

Packaged snacks, soft drinks, sweetened cereals, instant noodles, reconstituted meats now supply many daily calories in developed countries. In the United States, UPFs account for about 58% of adults' energy intake; in the UK it is 57%, and in Australia and New Zealand about 40%.[10] Middle-income countries are rapidly converging - all on upward trajectories as supermarkets, fast-food chains and global brands have expanded their reach.

Convenience beats quality hands down.

The long arc since the 1980s is clear: UPFs have become the dominant expression of the modern food system. They're profitable, portable and heavily marketed, but nutritionally poor and strongly linked to the global burden of chronic disease.

So why not simply join the fun and produce yet more junk food, but this time with a Fern Mark on it?

There are at least two reasons why not. Think of it like an investor. UPFs worry investors in the same way that tobacco and oil do. Indeed, a new study by a group of US universities, including Harvard University says UPFs have more in common with cigarettes than with fruit or vegetables, and require far tighter regulation.

"Cigarettes and UPFs are not simply natural products but highly engineered delivery systems designed specifically to maximize biological and psychological reinforcement and habitual overuse … These design features collectively hijack human biology, undermine individual agency, and contribute heavily to disease and health care costs."[11]

In reaction governments implement taxes, warning labels, advertising bans and school-food exclusions. In response to pressure, companies have been forced to cut sugar, salt and trans-fat or lose shelf space and legitimacy.

There's market risk too. A 2022 review of 26 experiments on willingness to pay for healthier food products found in 23 of 26 experiments consumers were willing to pay a price premium for healthier alternatives.[12] Similar findings emerge for "organic," "clean label," and "true price" products. Work by the Agribusiness Economics Research Unit (AERU) housed within Lincoln University, shows how powerful 'credence attributes' such as quality, sustainability and health are driving food premiums across all categories.

And there's a growing space for it. One example, the healthy snacks market is projected to nearly double to around US$200+ billion by 2035, according to Vantage Market Research, making it one of the most dynamic segments.

The smart money is betting on healthier, nutrient-dense foods. Especially if it can be derived from low-cost, low-footprint, high-trust sources.

Step up New Zealand. Director of the AERU, Dr Carolyn Saunders, argues that food from New Zealand should (and could) command a premium simply by being from here.

Our reputation for trusted, high-quality production suits the 'real food', 'healhy food' story. This is exactly why MPI's strategy to double the value of primary exports

"The ones that want that credible science and the ones who will jump on anything."

is based on adding nutritional and functional value, and on championing three core attributes: food safety, environmental stewardship, and the integrity of claims.

"We have built a reputation as a safe, efficient and sustainable provider of quality food," says MPI in its Long-term Insights Briefing. "[Now] we need to be proactive to ensure that we keep up with consumer expectations around sustainability, ethical production and food sovereignty. We also need to build trust mechanisms and plan for shocks."[13]

Afterall, we only need to feed 40 million people to have a strong industry - it might as well be the premium ones.

How can food producers build a premium based on truth, facts and nutritional value?

Phony food

Officially, we're starting with a good base. Carolyn Lister, a scientist with the Bioeconomy Sciences Institute says the harmonised Australasian Food Standards (FSANZ)[14] provide a strong basis for science-based claims.

"We're quite lucky in New Zealand that there are a whole lot of pre-approved health standards that can be used to say, yes, my product contains at least 10% of the recommended dietary nutrients requirements to make this or that claim. Consumers can see these directly on the labels."

But compliance is another matter.

"On the other hand, there are groups of companies which aren't investing in science and making spurious claims that aren't pre-approved or they're claiming compounds that don't have enough science or know what the concentrations are to have effect.

"So, we've got two groups of companies: the ones that want that credible science and the ones who will jump on anything."

How can they get away with it? Lister says that product marketers can change claims faster than authorities can check them. "MPI is the enforcement agency in New Zealand, and they don't necessarily have the money to be going out and checking every single claim, so it does rely somewhat on individuals saying 'hey, this looks spurious to me' to trigger an investigation."

It was one of the motivations behind the New Zealand Food Composition Database, a database produced by Lister's team containing the nutrient content of over 2,850 foods commonly prepared and eaten in New Zealand.[15]

Still, scientists worry about abuses.

Lister recalls the story of Ribena. In 2005 Auckland schoolgirls, Anna Devathasan and Jenny Suo, tested Ribena for a science project and found it contained almost no vitamin C, despite advertising that "the blackcurrants in Ribena have four times the vitamin C of oranges." Their results reached New Zealand's Commerce Commission, which confirmed that the ready-to-drink product had no detectable vitamin C. GlaxoSmithKline, Ribena's owner, pleaded guilty in 2007 to multiple Fair Trading Act breaches and was fined about NZ$220,000. Regulators called it a "massive breach of trust", and GSK was forced to correct its misleading vitamin C advertising.

It's by far not the only perpetrator.

Climate and sustainability claims are also rich sources of 'foodwashing'

Country of origin claims seem particularly prone to abuse. A long-running series of cases involved royal jelly supplements sold as if they were New Zealand products but largely contained imported ingredients. The New Zealand Health Food Company Ltd was fined $377,000 after the Commerce Commission found it misled customers about the country of origin.[16]

Climate and sustainability claims are also rich sources of 'foodwashing'. In 2024 researchers reviewing 369 New Zealand supermarket products found nearly four in five environmental claims were vague or ill-defined, and 42 still used "dolphin friendly/safe" wording that regulators explicitly discourage, concluding there is "widespread potential for greenwashing" on fish labels.[17]

Doing it right

Other disputes are more nuanced. The functional beverage Ārepa provides a cautionary tale of the line between claim and overclaim - but also of recovery. In late 2023 New Zealand Food Safety issued a formal notice saying some of Ārepa's health and labelling claims breached the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. Benefits attributed to pine bark extract (Enzogenol) and L-theanine were not properly substantiated for the way they were being marketed.

The safety notice invited a deluge of critical media and could have sunk the early-stage company, but founder Angus Brown leaned into the critique, working with the regulator to change the packaging in line with the standards. He also doubled down on the science promising to "come back stronger" by investing in human clinical trials, repackaging, and positioning Ārepa around "scientifically validated" brain health, including the "Sip Some Neuroscience" and "Uplift" launches.[18]

Brown's response demonstrates the rigour New Zealand brands should emulate: from aggressive functional health claims, through regulatory pushback and public scepticism, to a repositioning that leans more heavily on formal compliance and peer-reviewed evidence.

Carolyn Lister points to the Vital Vegetables[19] programme as another illustration of how to use scientific content well. "The aim was to assure the consumer that this coleslaw was delivering these nutrients, that were good for immunity or bone health and so on. And not just once but throughout the year," says Lister.

Funded by Horticulture NZ and the New Zealand and Australian governments, the brand did not start with a slogan and then go hunting for justification; it began with a substantial research programme involving (then) Plant & Food Research, CSIRO and other partners, focused on breeding and growing vegetables with measurably higher levels of key nutrients and phytochemicals. Lab analysis confirmed the nutritional uplift, so the marketing was built on a genuine product difference rather than vague ideas about "superfoods".

Crucially, the claims stayed close to what the science could comfortably support. Instead of promising to prevent disease or "boost immunity" in sweeping terms, Vital Vegetables focused on specific nutrient content and recognised physiological roles, framed in language allowed under the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. Serving sizes, percentage of recommended daily intakes and the distinction between nutrient and health claims were treated as design constraints, not obstacles. That discipline positioned the brand as serious and trustworthy rather than speculative.

"The ones that want that credible science and the ones who will jump on anything."

Consumers demand details

The granular, almost obsessive, commitment to molecular science by Arepa and the Vital Vegetable programme is still rare. Every month there appear glib health claims, as if merely being from New Zealand, grass-fed or sporting a green logo is enough.

New Zealand food heritage is in volume, where macro matters more than micro. There's an almost anti-intellectual strain to it. She'll be right, right?

London-based consultant Hamish Renton describes New Zealand as retaining a "bulk-exporter mentality … very effective in some cases, but in others it is a million miles wide but not very deep. It's like, 'Here it is, here's our stuff, who wants it?' It's an old-school approach, rather than focusing on developing for shopper or processor needs in international markets." That mindset, he adds, is "like taking a tank to a gunfight - too big, too bulky, too slow," when what's needed is "a more agile, tailored approach."

In our previous article, about consumer research, we asked Renton, along with market researcher Louise Beard, to rate New Zealand's appetite for research. Their answer: moderate to low.[20] Beard, who runs market research company Forward, says only a handful of organisations are investing at the level required to fully understand their overseas markets. The ones who get it right embed that thinking in every layer of governance and product design. Many still don't.

Yet technology has made the consumer less predictable and more powerful. Retail platforms let shoppers customise everything from flavour to ethics and expect instant fulfilment. AI now stitches these preferences into live data loops, promising precision and eroding patience. Consumers expect brands to know them already.

Beard sketches what's required. "Consumers will increasingly say, 'I want this type of food. These are my criteria. This is what's important to me. These are the kinds of meals I want. Find me some recipes. Send me the shop for the food.'"

The worry is that few Kiwi entrepreneurs swim in such data or appear hungry for it.

A core finding of the MPI briefing is the lack of "joined up thinking" between growers, researchers, regulators, businesses and consumers. This is a real challenge for artisan producers who have tinkered with small batches in their home kitchen and are now looking to expand to commercial scale.

Nicola O'Rourke, an investor and former manager of Lewis Road Creamery, gets frustrated by the lack of commercial discipline. In a previous article on innovation, O'Rourke wonders if more effort goes into product development than in customer insights.

"We're quite happy to sort of tinker around in our sheds, then go to market and realise we haven't spent enough time working out who the consumer is …We've almost done the opposite of being globalised. We need to get back out into the markets. What's happening globally? Look at where the big needs are changing and find what our role is in that as a country."

To build a globally trusted country-of-origin food story, where facts and efficacy cut through the noise, New Zealand needs more than hunches and spin to survive.

A ‘real food’ investment thesis

Why invest in the ‘real food’ revolution? Here’s an investors rationale for New Zealand food producers.

Go ‘short’ on UPFs

The science is converging, and regulatory pressure (taxes, marketing limits, reformulation, warning labels) will almost certainly increase, compressing margins in the most profitable UPF categories.

Go long on ‘real food’ where health and value align

Nutrient-dense minimally processed products (dairy, meat, produce, legumes, grains) with:

- Clear, defensible health benefits
- Clean labels and strong provenance
- Formats that match modern convenience (snacks, ready meals, RTD drinks) without drifting into UPF territory.

Categories where WTP premiums of 20–30%+ for health, organic, or clean-label attributes are consistently observed.

Exploit NZ’s comparative advantages:

Lean into exportable trust: health, safety, environmental credentials, and honest labelling.

Back companies that:

- Use independent science (universities, CRIs) to substantiate health and sustainability claims
- Keep processing minimal while using smart tech, packaging, and logistics to deliver shelf life and convenience
- Design for markets where health and sustainability premiums are structurally baked into purchasing (high-income Asian cities, North America, EU, UK).

Integrate nutrition into your ESG lens:

- Emerging ESG frameworks treat nutrition as financially material, not just reputational.
- That favours portfolios overweight healthier food companies and underweight firms whose profit pools depend on high-UPF, high-sugar portfolios.

From barcodes to audit trails

Newer GS1 barcodes and QR codes are quietly turning nutrient and sustainability claims into something you can audit. Instead of a “high in X” or “low carbon” badge floating free on pack, each product now carries a unique GS1 identity that links back to batch data, lab tests and certification records. Scan the code and you can see the numbers behind the nutrition panel - such as verified vitamin or mineral levels - and the documents behind sustainability logos, such as farm-of-origin, greenhouse gas methodology, or third-party audit reports. Barcodes are shifting claims from marketing copy to traceable, checkable promises.

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FoodHQ is the New Zealand hub of leading food and food production researchers that advocates for collaboration, food innovation and investment among researchers, industry, and policymakers to tackle challenges to advance the food industry.

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