

# Rating the food ranges

We looked at premium, standard and budget supermarket ranges and found that the differences aren't always what you'd expect

Several years ago, if you wanted to buy a ready-made lasagne from a supermarket, your choice would have been simple – you'd just have picked up a ready-made lasagne.

Things have changed dramatically. Nowadays, you're faced with a choice of premium, standard or budget lasagne, with all the big four supermarkets offering different versions of the same product to attract a wider selection of shoppers (see 'The premium and budget ranges', below). But what makes a premium product?

## Premium appeal

Premium foods feature glossy images and named ingredients such as Chianti wine and Davidstow Cheddar (see 'Premium packaging appeal', p46, for more) and they appear at eye level on shelves or in their own premium section.

So it's hardly surprising that in a recent Which? survey, almost four fifths of you

stated that you buy premium foods. A similar number said the reason you chose premium ranges was that you felt the food was of better quality. And around a quarter of you who chose premium foods said you did so for a treat.

The supermarkets told us that their premium foods offer superior taste and use high-quality ingredients, with Asda and Sainsbury's aiming to use products from British farmers. Asda said: '[We] try to hunt out great local producers and those that have leading expertise.'

Sainsbury's told us that 'Taste the Difference' foods adhere to strict guidelines, including always using only free-range eggs.

Tesco said: 'Our Finest range offers the consumer reassurance through provenance, quality and expertise.' Morrisons told us: 'Our premium range is prepared using no artificial colours or flavourings.'

## A quarter of you chose premium foods for a treat

To see just what you're getting for your money, we've looked at the ingredients and nutritional information of own-brand ready meals as well as fruit and veg.

## READY MEALS Budget vs premium

The premium ready meals we bought looked more appetising, and it was often clear what differentiated them from budget brands and made them superior. For example, most of the premium fish pies contained more fish – Morrisons' Favourites fish pie contained only 7.7 per cent, while its premium range contained 25 per cent.

**VERDICT** While premium brands beat the budget brands, it's worth taking a look at ingredients and quantities to reveal exactly what 'extras' you're getting for your cash.

## Budget vs standard

The differences between these ranges were less obvious. Although we couldn't compare the actual quality of the ingredients, and some ingredients lists vary, others appeared

| THE PREMIUM AND BUDGET RANGES |                      |                        |                      |                                  |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
|                               | BUDGET NAME          | NUMBER OF LINES (FOOD) | PREMIUM NAME         | NUMBER OF LINES (FOOD)           |
| ASDA                          | Smart Price          | More than 700          | Extra Special        | 1,600 (including seasonal lines) |
| MORRISONS                     | Bettabuy/ Favourites | Unavailable            | The Best             | Unavailable                      |
| SAINSBURY'S                   | Basics               | More than 500          | Taste the Difference | More than 1,300                  |
| TESCO                         | Value                | Around 500             | Finest               | Around 1,500                     |

Morrisons' budget fish pie can't match its premium pie



## OUR RESEARCH

In August and September 2007, we surveyed 2,645 online panel members about which supermarket ranges they buy. We scrutinised the labels of 54 ready meals from Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco to compare the ingredients and nutritional content.

# Premium packaging appeal

**You can't do it with a book, but can you judge a premium ready meal by its cover?**

It's easy to identify premium and budget ranges due to their distinctive appearance. The plain packaging of the budget lines is less luxurious and there's little description. For example, Asda Smart Price

cottage pie is described simply as 'minced beef and onions in gravy topped with mashed potato', and others had no description. Asda told us its Smart Price packaging 'reassures quality, but doesn't

look expensive'. Standard versions use more detailed descriptions, such as 'tender minced beef', but premium lines have a language and aesthetic that are all their own (see illustration below).

## HIGH-QUALITY PACKAGING

Classy photography suggests we're getting a high-quality product worth the extra spend

## PROVENANCE

Providing the story behind the food also helps to sell the idea that we're buying into good-quality food

## COOKING METHODS

Descriptions such as 'layered', 'coated', 'cured' and 'finished' make the foods sound less processed

## CLAIMS

Commonly describe the flavours, quality and freshness of the ingredients. The more descriptive these are, the more likely we are to try the product

## AUTHENTICITY

The more 'authentic' a recipe sounds, the better it seems

## WHAT THE MARKETING MEANS

Below are a few phrases used on premium packaging that we think need further explanation. When shopping, it's worth looking beyond the marketing. Examine the ingredients list instead to find out, for example, how much extra meat or fish you're getting compared with other versions.

### 'Traditionally reared beef'

Used on Sainsbury's Taste the Difference spaghetti bolognese. There is no standard national or international description in the beef-labelling regulations for traditionally reared beef. Sainsbury's told us: 'The mince used is from selected breeds of cattle, specified cuts and incorporates longer maturation periods to give it a much more developed flavour.'

### 'Butter crunch'

Used on Asda's Extra Special cookies. These were made with butter oil (essentially butter without the milk solids) and vegetable oil, rather than pure butter.

### 'Baked by a Scottish family'

Used on Sainsbury's Taste the Difference all-butter shortbread biscuits. Sainsbury's said: 'Taste the Difference foods typically use ingredients you'd find in your kitchen at home.'

### 'Porcini mushroom ragout'

Used on Tesco Finest spaghetti bolognese. This actually contained porcini mushroom powder, which hardly sounds as 'authentic'.

### 'Sprinkled with Parmigiano Reggiano'

Used on Asda's Extra Special spaghetti bolognese. Best to check how much a sprinkling is – in this case, it's 5g, or 1.1 per cent of the meal.

### 'Produced in the UK using beef from a Tesco welfare-assured source'

Used on Tesco's standard and premium bolognese but not the Value pack. Tesco said: 'Meat in our Value bolognese is also produced in the UK using beef from a Tesco welfare-assured source.' There's no difference – it's just that the Value brand doesn't feature the claim.



Asda's Extra Special cottage pie

remarkably similar. For example, the ingredients in Asda's Smart Price and standard lasagnes were almost identical.

Tesco's standard and Value spinach and ricotta cannelloni contained similar ingredients, too, just in slightly different proportions – the standard contained 4 per cent more ricotta and 3 per cent more Cheddar, for example.

**VERDICT** We found some similarities between the ranges, so it's worth checking ingredients and quantities to see if you can save money. Watch out for different ways of listing meat content, which can make it difficult to compare quantities – some list it as a percentage of the meal, others as a percentage of the sauce.

## Standard vs premium

The recipes of these ranges aren't always that different. Some of the key ingredients may be more indulgent or of better quality, but often the recipes looked quite similar. For example, the ingredients in Tesco's Finest and standard macaroni cheese were very much alike, even though the descriptions on the packs made them sound leagues apart – the key differences seemed to be that the Finest used ciabatta crumbs on top and Taw Valley Cheddar.

Although Asda's standard Haddock Cumberland Pie and Extra Special Fish Pie were different in some respects, the sauce used in both contained the same ingredients, with added chives in the standard.

**VERDICT** Sometimes premium and standard meals are more similar than you'd think. It's worth trying both – you may be surprised by the taste and save money. Indeed, of Sainsbury's premium range, one member said: 'It's very rare that I actually can taste the difference.'

## Pricing policy

Virtually all of the budget meals were smaller than the standard or premium versions. So, although their pack price was lower, weight for weight, some costs were close. Tesco's standard cottage pie was 1p

cheaper per 100g than its Value pie and Asda's standard lasagne was 4p cheaper per 100g than its Smart Price lasagne.

There were no such similarities between premium and standard prices – on average, you pay 20p more per 100g for the premium version.

**VERDICT** When checking the price, bear in mind the smaller portions you often get with budget meals and what extras you get with premium versions.

## FRUIT AND VEG

Premium lines of fruit and veg tend to offer more interesting or exclusive varieties, such as Ramiro peppers or shiitake mushrooms. Tesco told us: 'Foremost is taste. Products are consumer-tested against our standard brands to ensure they deliver on flavour.'

But we also came across similar varieties being sold as premium and standard. Morrisons sold Maris Peer potatoes and class 1 (see below) green beans from Kenya as both premium and standard (the premium potatoes were 21p more and premium beans 49p more). The premium beans were thinner, and the potatoes were smaller and a more consistent shape, but, depending on how you use them, appearance may not be of particular concern.

Morrisons said: 'We are reviewing the number of product lines in premium and budget ranges and therefore can't supply specific information at the current time.' Maris Peers also featured in Sainsbury's Basics and Tesco's standard ranges.

## Class and price

Budget fruit and veg tended to fall into class 2, and premium and standard into class 1. Class refers to appearance and not to eating quality, so we found class 2 crops were often less uniform or smaller.

Class 2 also allows some minor defects, such as skin blemishes. But we couldn't see much difference between the class 1 and 2 carrots and potatoes. Sainsbury's explained: 'Although the produce may be of a differ-

ent size or shape, our Basics range has the same quality integrity as all of Sainsbury's produce.' Tesco said: 'Value mushrooms taste great. When you're making a casserole, no one is going to know.'

Sometimes there was little price difference between ranges. For example, Sainsbury's class 2 Basics carrots were 66p per kg and its class 1 standards 67p per kg.

Budget produce often came in larger packs, which enhanced the sense of value, but equally, a smaller pack can make budget brands seem cheaper, too. Asda's Smart Price strawberries were normally £4.09 per kg, while its standard ones cost only 5p more per kg, yet the 227g budget pack was £1 less than the 454g standard one.

Unsurprisingly, premium produce came at a premium price. Sainsbury's said this is because it costs more to grow different varieties or use different crop production techniques, and yields are typically lower. Meanwhile, Tesco explained that its experts visit countries throughout the year to ensure that its high standards are met.

**VERDICT** Consider how you'll be using the produce and whether you're paying just for cosmetic difference. Check the price per kg/100g. See 'A spud is a spud is a spud', right.



## 'A SPUD IS A SPUD IS A SPUD'

**Jane Brown, 56, English teacher**

Jane buys most of her fruit and veg from Sainsbury's Basics range. She and husband Ian find that for their staples – apples, pears, carrots, leeks and potatoes – the economy range offers 'very good value'.

Although the size and shapes of the fruit and veg may vary, this doesn't bother them. 'Quite frankly, I find no difference in taste between the economy ones and the others,' said Jane. This is especially true for potatoes. As she puts it: 'A spud is a spud is a spud.'

Jane also sees the reduced packaging of the budget ranges as an additional benefit. 'In ecological terms, it's much better if you're not having to chuck away the polystyrene base for your perfect fruit covered by a nice little bit of cling film and a plastic lid,' she said.

## The healthier option

**Which range contains more of the nutritional 'nasties'?**

In our survey, around a quarter of you who chose premium foods said you did so because they are better for you.

But often, the premium ready meals we looked at were the highest in fat and saturates per 100g, while the budget meals were the lowest. Several, such as Sainsbury's Basics cottage pie and Basics spaghetti bolognese, earn Food Standard Agency green traffic lights for fat, saturates and salt.

Add to that the larger portion size of the premium meals, and that's a bigger slice of fat and saturates for your money. Often this is down to the ingredients used

– for example, Morrisons' The Best beef lasagne had cream, butter and mozzarella – and twice the fat per portion of the budget version. However, this does vary, depending on the product, so check the label and don't just assume one type is better than another.

## Added extras

Around a quarter of survey respondents who buy from premium ranges also thought that they had fewer artificial colours and preservatives. But we found little evidence of these in budget or standard versions.

In fact, the supermarkets were keen to point out that their budget ranges were free



from 'nasties'. Sainsbury's said its Basics range products are free from hydrogenated fats and artificial flavours.

## Look at the label

Check traffic-light labelling or the amounts of nutrients listed on the back (some stores use guideline daily amounts) if you're looking for a healthier option. It's worth taking Which?'s card with you (visit [www.which.co.uk/shoppingcard](http://www.which.co.uk/shoppingcard)).



Tesco's budget oranges (above) and premium fruit (left)