A MY CLEAN BOWL GUIDE

Beyond the Label

6 things I check before trusting any “allergy-safe” product

By Janet Marris · mycleanbowl.com

> If you’ve been reading labels for years, you already know the basics. This isn’t that guide. These are the **six checks beyond the front label** that separate careful shopping from truly safe shopping — the ones I learned the hard way.

1 A claim is a promise. A certification is a verification.

“Gluten-free” on the front means under 20 ppm — but in most cases it’s **self-declared**, tested in-house by the manufacturer. A third-party mark (like GFCO’s) means an independent body audits the facility and keeps testing, batch after batch.

HOW MUCH GLUTEN IS ACTUALLY ALLOWED?

“Gluten-free” label (legal limit, usually self-declared)

Third-party certified (e.g. GFCO — independently audited)

ppm = parts per million. Certification is twice as strict — and someone independent keeps checking.

My rule: for high-risk foods — oats, flours, baking mixes — I only buy certified. For everything else, a clear label from a brand I trust is fine.

2 “No gluten-containing ingredients” is not a gluten-free claim.

This phrase — and cousins like “made without wheat” — only says nothing was **added on purpose**. No testing threshold, no cross-contact guarantee. Treat it as marketing. (See it in action on the next page.)

Label anatomy: the 30-second expert scan

A made-up granola bar label — with everything I'd flag before it goes in my cart.

"Made without wheat!"

INGREDIENTS

Whole grain oats, honey, sunflower oil, malt extract, dried cranberries, natural flavors, sea salt.

...and no "may contain" statement anywhere.

RED FLAG
"Made without wheat!"
Not a tested claim — and gluten also comes from barley and rye.

RED FLAG
Malt extract
Made from barley. This "wheat-free" bar isn't gluten-free at all.

CHECK FURTHER
Oats & "natural flavors"
Oats: cross-contamination risk unless certified. Vague flavors: worth one question to the brand.

DON'T BE FOOLED
No "may contain" warning
Advisory statements are voluntary in the US. Silence is not safety.

3 Silence on "may contain" means nothing.

Advisory statements ("may contain traces of…", "made in a facility that…") are **voluntary**. A label *without* one is not automatically safer — the manufacturer may simply have chosen not to print it.

4 "Wheat-free" is not "gluten-free."

Gluten also comes from **barley and rye** — hiding under names like malt, malt extract and brewer's yeast. Look specifically for a gluten-free claim, ideally certified. Never rely on "wheat-free" alone.

5 When in doubt, ask the manufacturer — these exact questions.

Customer service lines expect these calls. Vague questions get vague answers, so I ask three specific ones:

1. Is this made on a dedicated line, or a shared line with cleaning protocols?
2. Do you test the finished product for allergens — and to what ppm?
3. If an ingredient supplier changes, does the label change too?

Tip: a confident, specific answer is itself a good sign. “We can’t guarantee anything” tells you what you need to know.

6 Spend your attention where the risk actually is.

You don’t need certified everything. Risk-rank your cart and put your label-scrutiny (and budget) at the top:

CHECK HARDEST

- ! Oats, flours & baking mixes
- ! Spice blends & seasonings
- ! Bulk bins
- ! Granola, bars & cereals
- ! Anything from a shared mill

LOWER RISK

- ✓ Single-ingredient whole foods
- ✓ Fresh produce
- ✓ Plain meats & eggs
- ✓ Brands you’ve already vetted

+ Bonus: “New look!” means “re-read the label.”

Recipes, suppliers and facilities change without ceremony — often the only clue is refreshed packaging. Anything you haven’t bought in a few months is a **new product** as far as your label-reading is concerned. This one habit catches more surprises than any other on this list.

Keep this next to your grocery list

Pair this guide with our one-page Grocery Checklist for the full shopping system — and find allergy-safe recipes and honest product reviews at **mycleanbowl.com**