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23

Special report | **Food labelling in the EU**  
Consumers can get lost in the maze of labels



EUROPEAN  
COURT  
OF AUDITORS

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**What audit questions did we ask?**



**What did we audit?**



**What did we find?**



**What do we recommend?**

Special Report N° 23/2024:

# Food labelling in the EU:

Consumers can get lost in the maze of



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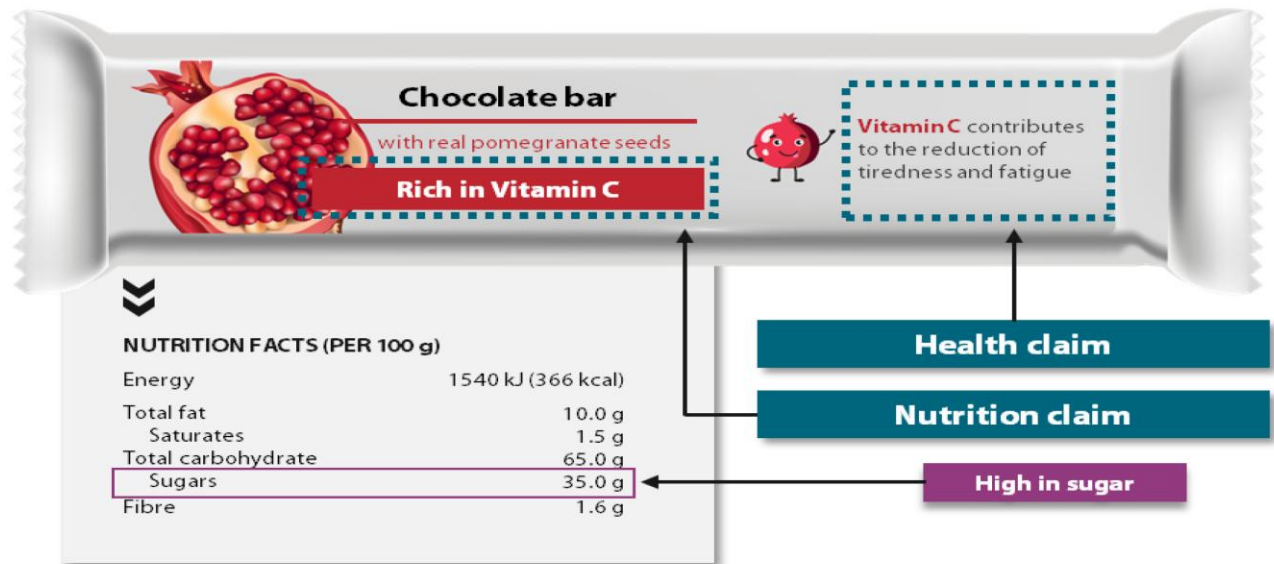


# Why did we do this audit?

Growing interest in food information

Marketing practices evolved

- **Rising consumer demand** for accurate and comprehensive food labelling
- Label-based choices impact consumer **health and wellbeing**
- **Food options have expanded**

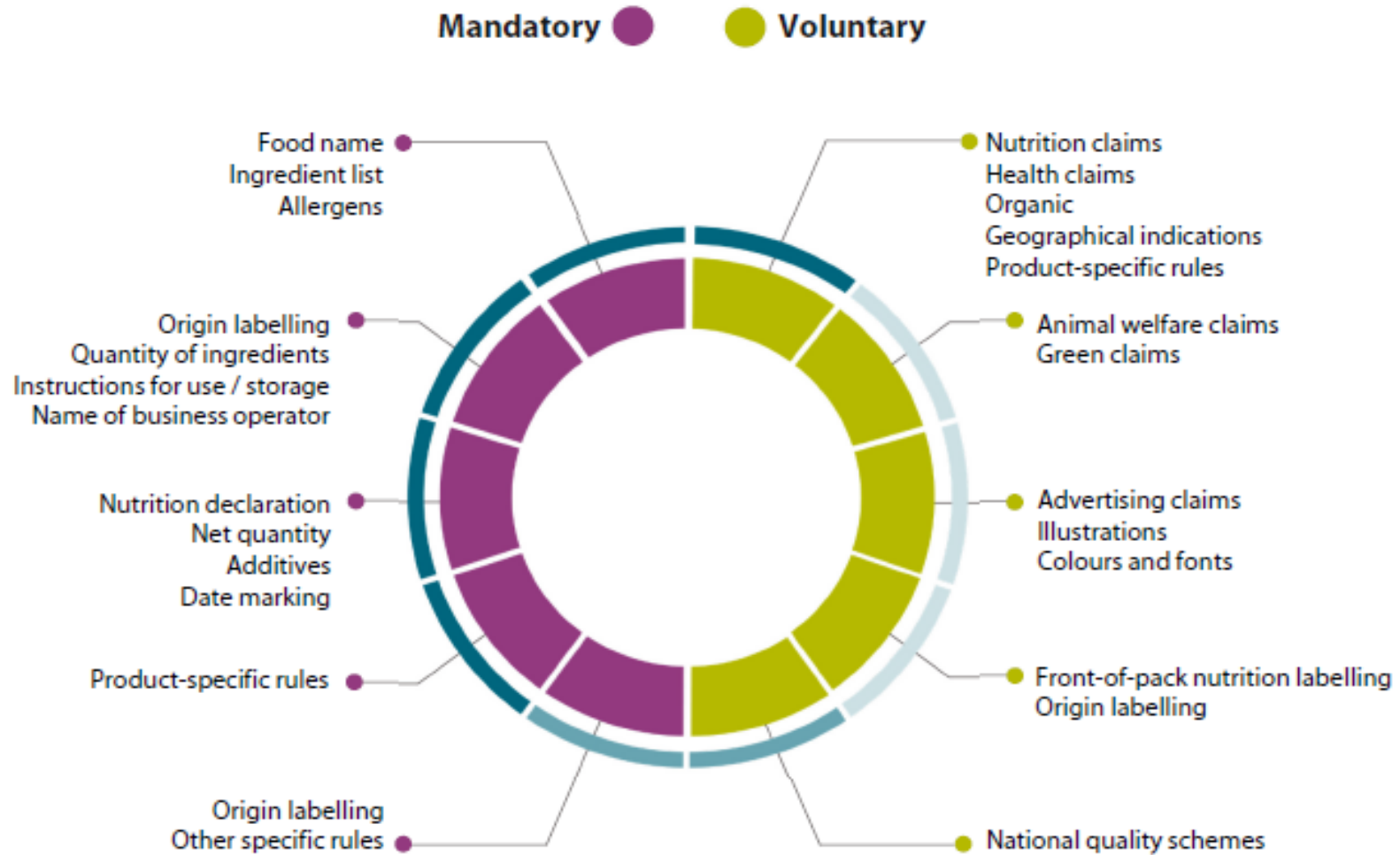


# essential information but it has notable gaps



- **2014 Food Information to consumers Regulation ensures harmonized mandatory labelling** providing for key information on nutrition and allergens
- **7 out of 11 updates pending** (e.g. botanical claims, nutrient profiles, front-of pack nutrition labelling, precautionary allergen labelling)
- **3 updates with no progress** (legibility, vegetarian/vegan food, reference intakes)
- Outstanding actions with alcoholic beverages and origin labelling

# Mandatory and voluntary information on labels



Regulated by the EU

Regulated by member states

Subject to the general rules on labelling set out in the EU regulation (FIC)

# Information on label can be **confusing or misleading**

- Labelling practices **evolve** continually, can be **complex and confuse consumers**
- **Growing number** of voluntary labels: **901** identified in 2013
- Potentially misleading practices:
  - **clean labels** ("antibiotic-free")
  - **uncertified qualities** ("fresh", "natural"),
  - **misleading product names, omitting information**
- **Environmental claims** and risk of **greenwashing**
- Legal basis → not sufficiently clear to prevent such practices



## › **INGREDIENTS**

Yogurt (skimmed MILK powder - CREAM - LACTIC ferments) –  
**Sugar 8.9 %** -  
Natural flavours -  
Vitamin D

# Understanding of labels is **not systematically tracked**



- **No systematic monitoring** of consumer needs or label understanding by the Commission and Member States
- Monitoring is **focused on specific aspects** (e.g. front-of pack, digital labelling, date marking)
- Consumers do not always understand labels
- **Little attention** is given to consumer information campaigns



# Control systems **exist** but there are important **shortcomings** and **weaknesses**



- Control systems are in place but are **complex**, involving multiple authorities, leading to **gaps**
- Controls focus on mandatory information
- Checks on **voluntary information** and **online retail** are weak
- Fines are not always **dissuasive, effective, or proportionate**
- **Reporting** arrangements for member states are cumbersome and **lack added value**



# What do we recommend?

- 1 Address pending actions** in the FIC and Claims regulations, focusing on origin labelling and alcoholic beverage
- 2 Step up efforts to analyse labelling practices** and, together with member states, **improve guidance for food companies.**
- 3 Systematically monitor consumer needs** and **their understanding** of food labelling (by awareness raising campaigns or a food labelling guide)
- 4 Encourage member states to strengthen their checks on voluntary labels and online retail**
- 5 Improve consistency and quality of data** reported by member states on controls and increase information sharing on food labelling issues with the public



# THANK YOU

for your attention!

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