

# The List: What to Eat, What to Avoid, How to Compromise

*Shopping for food can be mind-boggling once the veil of food science, modern medicine, and conventional farming has been lifted. What should you buy organic? Does “big organic” even help? Are there any convenience foods that can keep a family healthy? And what if budget won't fit the optimal choices – are there some best places to compromise?*

*Budget, environmental and health decisions are very personal and complex, particularly when it comes to family size, time available to make from scratch, location in the world and shopping options. What follows are some of my personal grocery shopping decisions; I hope you are inspired to make mindful purchases when you shop as well!*

*When I think about buying food, if it's a whole food, I'm happy. If it's a well-sourced (organic, local, etc.) whole food, I'm thrilled. Those are the litmus tests I apply in general:*

1. **Skip what is fake, always.**
2. **Buy what is real, always.**
3. **Buy what is real and grown properly, whenever you can.**  
(A rundown of my grocery thinking can be found [HERE](#).)

*In the first column of this chart, you'll find foods (and “foods”) I always avoid eating or buying (or know that it's junk at least). The middle column is a step up, but still a compromise compared to the last column, which contains the ideal choice in a given situation based on my current knowledge. Sometimes I do live in the middle column, FYI. Life isn't ideal!*

*I've made some lists of what I buy at various places if that would help direct your purchases as well:*

- [Costco](#)
- [Aldi \(and Save-a-Lot\)](#)
- [Tropical Traditions](#)
- [Amazon](#)



To your health (and sanity)!

*Katie*

<i>No Way!</i>	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Hey hey!</i>
<b>Produce</b> <i>In general, focus your organic funds on the dirty dozen produce list for maximum impact.</i>		
<a href="#">Not washing your produce</a>	Any conventional produce is better than not eating your fruits and veggies.	Fruits and veggies from the <a href="#">clean 15</a> , the 15 least chemical-laden items
Fruit snacks	Regular old fruit from the <a href="#">dirty dozen</a> ; dried fruits (watch for <a href="#">sulfites</a> )	Organic fruits of any kind, especially local; <a href="#">DIY fruit snacks</a> also great.
Canned vegetables (peas, beans)	Frozen veggies (Costco has some amazing organic ones). Steam or saute, <a href="#">do not microwave</a> .	Fresh vegetables, focus on dirty dozen for organic \$. <a href="#">Fermenting</a> adds more nutrition <a href="#">no matter what!</a>
<a href="#">Most juices</a> – why bother with *not* the whole fruit?	100% grape, cranberry or orange juice. Some redeeming qualities there. <a href="#">Make popsicles</a> .	Bottled kombucha or home-pressed fresh juice
Canned fruits in heavy syrup; sweetened applesauce.	In a pinch, canned fruit in its own juice. Unsweetened applesauce. Organic best.	Freshly picked, whole fruits. <a href="#">Home dried fruits</a> . <a href="#">Homemade applesauce</a> with skins included.
Off season supermarket tomatoes – why bother?	Canned tomatoes. <a href="#">Nutrition enhanced by cooking</a> but BPA in cans a BIG concern.	<a href="#">Organic tomatoes in glass jars</a> or <a href="#">home canned</a> ; some brands of canned goods taking BPA out of cans
Canned refried beans with lots of bad oils & additives	In a pinch, canned beans or pressure cooked dry beans; organic refried beans with minimal added ingredients	<a href="#">Dry beans soaked overnight and cooked slowly</a> ; <a href="#">homemade refried beans</a>
Corn (truly a starch/grain)	White potatoes	Sweet potatoes
<p><i>The eternal question: local and non-organic or organic and not local? Most bloggers in the <a href="#">Real Food Face-Off</a> chose local every time, and almost every time, I would, too. Even the Dirty Dozen is called into question nowadays on whether they're any worse (or the Clean 15 any better) than any other conventional produce.</i></p> <p><i>For your budget, it's great to talk to your local farmers; often you can find someone who keeps chemical use at a minimum for a much lower cost than grocery organic produce.</i></p> <p><i>When my dad had cancer, <a href="#">I chose organic</a>. But nothing is black and white – check out how <a href="#">Bethany</a> has flipped back and forth over the years and sometimes <a href="#">considers ditching the organic movement entirely</a>.</i></p>		

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<b>Dairy</b> <i>Because cattle consume a lot of food to produce a little milk or meat, the chemicals are concentrated in these products. Prioritize organic over plant items.</i>		
<p>Organic, UHT (ultra high temp) pasteurized milk – UHT milk is shelf stable and not a living food.</p> <p>Many people would put conventional milk here...</p> <p><i>Sort it out for yourself with “<a href="#">What Kind of Milk Should I Buy?</a>”</i></p>	<p>...others accept regular store milk as a compromise. Whole milk = risk the toxins in the fat, skim = missing the <a href="#">protective factor of healthy saturated fats</a>.</p> <p>*preferably rBGH/rBST free</p> <p>*organic, non-UHT pasteurized milk</p>	<p>*organic, low-temp pasteurized skim milk with added cream</p> <p>*organic, grassfed, <a href="#">unhomogenized</a> low-temp pasteurized whole milk</p> <p>*non-organic, grassfed raw milk</p> <p>*<a href="#">organic, grassfed raw milk</a></p>
<p>Processed cheese product (Kraft singles, Velveeta); powdered cheese; EZ cheese in a can</p>	<p>Regular cheeses: cheddar, mozzarella, Colby, Monterey Jack. Brands w/o growth hormones best.</p> <p><a href="#">Sourcing Quality Cheese</a></p>	<p>Organic and/or raw and/or grassfed cheeses, many imported European cheeses will be somewhat grassfed.</p> <p><a href="#">Shred your own.</a></p>
<p>Cottage cheese and sour cream with lots of weird additives</p>	<p>Cottage cheese and sour cream with simple ingredients: cultured milk, cream, etc. (Daisy brand is good)</p>	<p>Organic cottage cheese or sour cream without weird ingredients; grassfed best</p>
<p>Yogurt with lots of added sugar and colors; fat free yogurt</p>	<p>Plain yogurt with live and active cultures, organic optimal (if budget is <i>not</i> a concern, homemade isn't much better FYI)</p>	<p><a href="#">Homemade whole yogurt</a> from a good source of milk; raw even better (but <a href="#">difficult to master</a>) or <a href="#">kefir</a>.</p>
<b>Non-Dairy Alternatives</b> <i>If dairy causes you a problem, you may want a non-dairy alternative to milk or cheese. In my opinion and research, dairy products should not be a problem for those who are not allergic, sensitive or intolerant though.</i>		
<p>Soy milk of any kind, sweetened almond milk</p>	<p>Unsweetened processed almond milk (often has many additives)</p>	<p>Homemade almond milk (soak almonds or use skinned almonds)</p>
<p>Boxed sweetened coconut milk</p>	<p>Canned coconut milk with few ingredients (without BPA would be nice)</p>	<p>Homemade coconut milk; <a href="#">coconut cream</a> in glass jars</p>

*No Way!*

*Okay*

*Hey hey!*

### Treats

*Obviously junk food is not part of an optimal diet, but a cheat here and there can help you stick to your guns when it comes to daily eating of real food. Here's how to make the cheats not hurt so badly.*

Some notes on reading ingredients for these “fun foods” - watching for the worst of the ingredients and drawing your line there allows you to have some snack standards, a way to say “no” to some of the offenders while allowing others on a compromise day/meal/snack/event.

- **MSG** – unfortunately, [MSG presents itself under over 20 different terms](#), beginning with monosodium glutamate. It's an excito-toxin and neuro-toxin, and we are really trying to stay away from it. Watch for it particularly in sausage and crunchy snacks, especially highly flavored items. I watch for key words like “autolyzed,” “hydrolyzed,” any part of “glutamate” and “yeast extract.”
- **High fructose corn syrup** – the jury is in and out over whether this sweetener really is worse than sugar in the long run, but either way, as Michael Pollan reminds, it's a marker for more highly processed, cheap foods.
- **Bad fats** – see the fats and oils section for more. Soybean, cottonseed and corn are the worst offenders along with anything hydrogenated or interesterified.
- **Artificial colors** – they can be pegged for a variety of symptoms, especially in kids. They're also a marker of more highly processed foods.
- Interesting read: “[7 Everyday Foods Not Proven Safe for Kids](#)”

Flavored chips (the ingredients almost always include a form of MSG), Cheetos, etc.	Conventional potato or corn chips, occasionally, especially if the fats are something <i>other</i> than corn, soy, or cottonseed. Popcorn w/o bad oils.	Organic tortilla chips, popcorn (home-popped in coconut oil = awesome!)
Artificial and soft serve ice cream	Other conventional ice cream – I like to look for Breyer's, Haagen Dazs, or other brands with more simple ingredients. But I'm really not all that picky; it's my indulgence.	Homemade ice cream like <a href="#">this dark chocolate</a>
Goldfish, Cheese-Its, and quite a few other crunchy snacks (looking for MSG under many names)	Gluten-free crackers with decent ingredients – definitely no artificial sweeteners, no extruded shapes (like Triscuits) – preferably no soybean oil. Crunchmaster and Blue Diamond are some we really like.	<a href="#">Homemade whole wheat crackers</a> (GF flour works too) or <a href="#">sourdough</a>

<p>“Light” condiments like mayo, Miracle Whip, dressings – all have artificial sweeteners. Almost all mayo uses bad fats. Cheap soy sauce.</p>	<p>Regular old condiments – ketchup (better to find one with organic sugar than HFCS), BBQ sauce (very sugary though!), other sauces (read ingredients every time), soy sauce</p>	<p><a href="#">Homemade mayo</a>, organic ketchup, most mustard is fine, homemade BBQ sauce (in my book <a href="#">Better Than a Box</a>), GF fermented soy sauce</p>
<p>Soda of any kind, <i>especially</i> diet</p>	<p>Unsweetened iced tea, coffee</p>	<p><a href="#">Water kefir</a>, kombucha</p>
<p>Sugar-free juices and water add-ins like Crystal Light</p>	<p>Flavored water. I'd never pay the \$\$ myself, but at least there's not usually sugar.</p>	<p>Water – filtered to get chlorine, fluoride out (<a href="#">here's the filter we use</a>). Add lemon or mint if you need flavor.</p>
<p>Packaged granola bars, Nutri-Grain bars, Cliff Bars (soy)</p>	<p>Fruit, nut and seed bars with natural sweeteners; <a href="#">homemade granola bars</a></p>	<p>Larabars (or homemade fruit/nut bars from <a href="#">Healthy Snacks to Go</a>)</p>
<p>Peanuts and peanut butter (especially some brands of roasted peanuts include MSG)</p>	<p>Other nuts and seeds</p>	<p>Sprouted nuts and seeds or <a href="#">homemade crispy nuts</a></p>

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<p align="center"><b>Fish and Seafood</b>  <i>Start by checking current <a href="#">seafood watch list</a> or app.</i></p>		
Some say: all shellfish	Some say: only shellfish caught without harming the ecosystem	Oysters and mussels provide key nutrients hard to find elsewhere!
Farmed salmon (any "Atlantic" salmon)	Pacific salmon – should check if farmed <i>Does the radiation from Japan affect this issue? Probably - something to keep an eye on.</i>	<a href="#">Wild Alaskan salmon</a> , canned or fresh caught ( <a href="#">salmon patties</a> are easy!)
<a href="#">Tilapia</a> caught in China, tuna packed in veg oil	Tilapia caught in Costa Rica, tuna in water	<i>In general, only eat tuna once a week</i>
Big fish like kingfish, swordfish, etc. have high mercury content; eat sparingly	Basics like whitefish, mahi mahi, grouper. Learn your area re: can you eat fish you caught yourself?	Tiny fish like sardines, anchovies and more

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<p align="center"><b>Meat and Poultry</b>  <i>As with dairy, these animals concentrate chemicals and may have additional issues like hormones and antibiotics that produce doesn't deal with.            Prioritize organic (and/or farmers you know) when possible.</i></p>		
Irradiated beef, beef treated with ammonia, general fast food and grocery store beef	Local, hormone free beef (best if the farmer says no-GMO); grassfed but not organic beef, grain finished beef	<a href="#">Grassfed, organic beef</a> , preferably local (how to <a href="#">buy a whole cow</a> to save your budget)
Grocery store chicken: confined, fed who knows what, injected with a "solution" to increase mass. Mass produced "broth" that is usually high in additives (MSG) and contains no gelatin.	Conventionally grown poultry (grocery store) without added salt or "solution" to plump it up. "Vegetarian fed" chicken is only a small step up from other chickens (they should eat bugs!), but better than chickens who may have eaten other chickens.	Locally raised chickens with locally raised grains, allowed to run around outdoors and eat what they choose along with their grain. Organic feed is one more step up, assures no GMO corn or soy. Proper <a href="#">homemade chicken stock</a> .
Processed chicken nuggets, patties, etc.	Chicken with the bones from the store. Don't let packaging fool you – FDA outlawed all hormones in chicken. Organic ok, often <a href="#">not worth premium</a> . Make stock from the bones.	<i>Best option:</i> Local, organically grown chickens who are allowed to run outdoors AND follow cattle to eat the grubs from their cow plops. Joel Salatin style farming.
Grocery store lunchmeat, hot dogs, bacon and ham chock full of sodium nitrate and nitrite. (Every so often in the summer? Go for it!)	Preservative or nitrite-free lunchmeat and sausage (many brands have "naturals" now), lower nitrate bacon from local sources. <a href="#">Also questioned...and confusing.</a>	Farm bacon from pigs allowed to live as pigs ought to live – free to root around in the dirt. <a href="#">Roast your own chicken</a> or beef and slice for sandwiches. <a href="#">Homemade lunchmeat</a> .
Eating only egg whites, Egg Beaters, fake egg substitutes	Plain old eggs, anything else from the store (i.e. cage free, commercial organic, etc.)	Local, free range eggs; pastured; organic, etc. (Joel Salatin style)
***Please see <a href="#">this post</a> to help you decipher egg cartons and find "best" eggs.		
<i>On pork and turkey: Some say never eat pork of any kind. Some say find sources like described above (hey, hey! column). Turkey follows guidelines like chicken.</i>		

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<b>Grains</b> <i>Many grains are protected from chemical sprays landing directly on the edible portion, so they are often lower on the organic priority list. GMO crops a possible exception – but no grains are approved GM (yet). <a href="#">Learn about wheat and the GM issue HERE.</a></i>		
White bread products, anything with “enriched wheat flour” (aka white flour) as the first ingredient.	Gluten-free baked goods with simple ingredients and not a ton of starch.	<a href="#">Homemade sourdough</a> bread – either white, whole wheat or gluten-free. Sourdough is the super star of breads! Or <a href="#">sprouted flour</a> breads.
<a href="#">Whole grain wheat breads</a> ; bread products with at least half whole grains. (All commercially produced breads are highly questionable!)	Some commercial breads aren't <i>horrible</i> – look for ingredients omitting high fructose corn syrup, other added sweeteners and added gluten. But it's a gamble...	Whole grain wheat bread products you make yourself, properly <a href="#">soaked optimal</a> . Organic or “certified chemical free” best. Einkorn has been good for many people as well.
Highly processed gluten-free products with many ingredients ( <i>Remember that “gluten-free” does not mean food is healthier.</i> )	Homemade gluten-free baked goods with GF all-purpose flour.	Homemade, soaked whole grain gluten-free baked goods, like these <a href="#">muffins</a> and this <a href="#">flatbread</a> .
<i>Note on grains: Some will tell you all grains are bad for you, or that all whole grains are bad for you. For some people and some conditions, this is absolutely true. In our family, we eat a lot of grain-free baked goods and in general far fewer grains than most folks. We like to take a complete grain-free break for at least a month once a year. Here's <a href="#">our last Whole30 meal plan</a>, if you're interested.</i>		
Doughnuts – studies say they're as bad for us as cigarettes!	Grain-free baked goods with unsoaked nuts, nut butters ( <i>moderation is key</i> )	Homemade grain-free baked goods, especially those with <a href="#">coconut flour</a>
Pasta mixes with powdered cheese, trans fats, MSG and other additives.	White pasta is a “sometimes” food. Whole grain pasta or brown rice pasta better...maybe.	Soaked, homemade pasta or noodles. Organic best. (I like to make pasta dishes with rice instead to simplify.)
Sugary instant oatmeal packets; quick oats are questionable.	Rolled oats, <a href="#">properly soaked and cooked</a> ; steel-cut oats. (Some say all oats are not great, <a href="#">especially for teeth</a> .)	Whole oat groats, whizzed briefly in a food processor right before soaking.
Boxed rice mixes with lots of ingredients; instant	White rice, basmati, jasmine rice, unsoaked	<a href="#">Soaked brown rice</a> (the arsenic issue clouded all



rice is questionable.	brown rice (some say white rice is even better than brown though!)	this, but most rice really is just fine)
	Whole grains like quinoa, millet, barley and spelt (unless gluten sensitive for the last two)	Soaked or sprouted whole grains
Jiffy cornbread mix; “degerminated” cornmeal	<a href="#">Homemade cornbread</a> ; whole corn tortillas without additives; <a href="#">gluten-free cornbread</a>	Soaked homemade cornbread; properly nixtamalized masa (corn treated with lime)
Sugary cereals; any cereal with flakes or shapes	Cereal made with whole grains that are not in shapes (not extruded)	Soaked (or at least homemade) <a href="#">granola</a> (still a “sometimes” food)
<b>Sweeteners</b> <i>Keep in mind that even natural sweeteners are still high in calories, raise your blood sugar, and generally aren't necessary in a healthy diet. Use even the highest quality sweeteners sparingly; the price premium will help remind you of that!</i>		
<a href="#">White refined sugar</a> , including regular white table sugar, brown sugar, dark brown sugar, powdered sugar	Organic cane sugar, evaporated cane juice (still refined but better because they are not GMO) <a href="#">Sucanat and rapadura</a> .	Best for your health to avoid sweeteners and focus on naturally sweet foods like fruit
High fructose corn syrup, light corn syrup	Pasteurized honey (grocery store honey)	Local, <a href="#">raw honey</a> ; unsulphured molasses
Fake maple syrup (has one or more of the above in it)	<a href="#">Agave</a> (although controversial – I personally stay away)	<a href="#">Real maple syrup</a> – has some redeeming minerals
<a href="#">Erythritol, sorbitol and other “itols”</a>	<a href="#">Coconut sugar and palm sugar</a> – both awesomely natural and not dangerous; the only reason they're in the middle column is cost/availability.	<a href="#">Sorghum syrup</a> – also some minerals here; <a href="#">Date sugar</a> and <a href="#">yacon</a>
<a href="#">Artificial sweeteners</a> : Nutrasweet (aspartame), Splenda (sucralose), Acesulfame K, and more	<a href="#">Stevia powder</a> (white, highly processed form) <i>Stevia is natural but can be highly processed...</i>	<a href="#">Liquid stevia extract</a> or <a href="#">green dried leaves</a> (you can make stevia extract DIY too)

<i>No Way!</i>	<i>Okay</i>	<i>Hey hey!</i>
<b>Fats</b> <i>Animal fats concentrate the toxins, so organic is important. For plant oils, organic is one way to ensure it hasn't been processed with toxic chemicals.</i>		
"Vegetable oil" or "salad oil"	In a pinch, some might keep a small bottle of organic <a href="#">canola oil</a> on hand for a quick liquid oil option	<a href="#">Refined coconut oil</a> – melts great and takes the place of vegetable oil in baking recipes
Anything made with <a href="#">soybean or corn oils</a> (salad dressings and fried foods are huge culprits here)	Virgin olive oil – less flavor, higher smoke point than extra virgin olive oil, good for compromise sauté	Extra virgin olive oil (see <a href="#">olive oil terms</a> for details). <a href="#">Make homemade salad dressings</a> .
<a href="#">Trans fats</a> – now banned by the FDA but I still don't like to see the words "hydrogenated oil" anywhere in my ingredients	Omega-6s, aka <a href="#">polyunsaturated fats</a> (we eat too many) like grapeseed and sesame oils (corn and soybean are high in omega 6 too)	Foods with added omega-3 or that are high in <a href="#">Omega-3s, like salmon and flax</a> (flax oil is <a href="#">only to be used cold</a> )
<a href="#">Interesterified fats</a> – the new untested replacement for the banned trans fats.	Peanut oil is a less-awful oil that you might find while "out" and cheating on something deep-fried	"Extra virgin" or "unrefined" <a href="#">coconut oil</a> , fermented even better
<a href="#">Margarine</a> , any fake butter or solid oil "tubs"	Conventional store <a href="#">butter</a>  <a href="#">Sourcing the best butter</a>	Hormone and antibiotic free butter; Grassfed, organic butter or <a href="#">ghee</a> optimal
Partially or fully hydrogenated anything; Hydrogenated lard, vegetable shortening	Palm oil – the nutrient profile is actually great, but watch for over-processing and also sustainable harvesting.	Organic, local lard – find a butcher near you or render it yourself! Home rendered tallow; chicken or bacon fat for frying. <a href="#">Palm shortening</a> (well sourced).
Cottonseed oil – highly GMO and very high omega 6s	Sunflower oil is high in omega 6s – but also high in Vitamin E. Use it cold.	Safflower oil is better, high in <a href="#">monounsaturated fat</a> (like an avocado) and higher smoke point.
<i>It's worth saying in this section: Don't be afraid of foods with cholesterol. Dietary cholesterol (like <a href="#">egg yolks</a>) doesn't actually translate into blood cholesterol.</i>		
<i>Find a chart of how to use all your healthy fats <a href="#">here</a>.</i>		

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<p align="center"><b>Storage Containers and Cookware</b>  <i>The danger with what our food goes IN is always that chemicals can leach from the container into the food.</i></p>		
<a href="#">Bisphenol-A</a> (BPA) in plastic, including canned foods lining	BPA-free plastic, including plastic zippered bags	Non-plastic options like stainless steel or glass
Plastics no. 3, 6 and some 7s (7 is a catch all category; you'd have to call the manufacturer to see if it contains BPA...)	Plastic no. 2 or 5. Number 1 is for single use only. Try to use only for cold, dry foods. Do NOT microwave.	Stainless steel, glass, ceramic (lead-free). Repurposed glass jars are a very inexpensive storage solution!
Styrofoam cups and takeout containers (no. 6 plastic, contains bisphenol-A)	Plastic disposable items	Cardboard containers, or <a href="#">bring your own!</a>
<a href="#">Aluminum</a> pots and pans	<a href="#">Teflon</a> /non-stick is iffy-use only at low temps if you must use it!	Stainless steel, <a href="#">cast iron</a> , <a href="#">enameled cast iron</a> , glass
Aluminum or non-stick baking sheets (could you really have non-stick without scratching it?)	<a href="#">Silicone</a> continues to be a questionable item for me...	Stainless steel cookie sheets or baking stones
<a href="#">Aluminum foil</a> , plastic wrap	Waxed paper, freezer paper, regular plastic Ziploc bags  <a href="#">"7 Ways to Avoid Plastic Wrap"</a>	Reusable bags made of cloth, cover bowls with their own lids or a plate, <a href="#">bake potatoes without foil</a> , stainless steel grill basket
Phthalates (in plastics)	Read packaging or call manufacturers, especially of children's toys, to find phthalate-free plastic	Wooden dishes or toys, glass, stainless steel, fabric toys
<a href="#">The microwave</a>		Heat naturally on the stovetop or in the oven
<p><i>Other favorites:</i> <a href="#">Bento-Style Lunch Boxes</a>, <a href="#">Reusable sandwich and snack bags</a>, <a href="#">Wooden cutting boards</a></p>		

## One Quick Note

### Personal Products and Cleaners

*What goes on our skin and in our air is as important as what goes into our bodies. I have some incredibly comprehensive lists of both on Kitchen Stewardship that I keep well updated. The research and product availability in that arena changes even faster than foodstuffs, so it's better to keep that one dynamic rather than make it part of the printable.*

[Click here for the list of green cleaners.](#)

[Click here for the list of natural body products.](#)

[Click here for some ideas to stock a natural medicine cabinet.](#)

I'm kind of an aficionado of natural sunscreens – to date, our family has tested over 60 of them, with more added every year. [Find out the scoop on what to put on your skin and why.](#)

*Kitchen*  
**STEWARDSHIP**  

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*baby steps to real food AND natural living*

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