

Unit 6 The Organic Food Movement

Lesson 1: What is Organic Food?

Here's good advice for practice: go into partnership with nature; she does more than half the work and asks for none of the fee.

Martin H. Fischer (1879-1962) *Fisherisms* (Howard Fabing and Ray Marr)¹

Organic Defined

Eric Moon (2002)² provides us with a discussion of the word 'organic' and provides a working definition

The word organic itself is typically misunderstood in its true meaning. According to Webster the term "organic" is defined as - 1) relating to or derived from living matter. 2) not involving or produced with chemical fertilizers or other artificial chemicals. 3) characterized by natural development. Any of these definitions are more than a convincing way to describe organic.

Another way to think of the word is food produced by natural, unrefined, or untreated methods. According to the Organic Trade Association, "Organic refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. It includes a system of production, processing, distribution and sales that assures consumers that the products maintain the organic integrity that begins on the farm" (2008).³

History of the Organic Food Movement

According to Tina King in Organic Food 101

In the early 1970s, "organic" was an attempt to define and begun to emerge in the 1950's, and had become reliant upon synthetic pesticides. Those of us who grew, and ate, organic food were influenced by events such as the first Earth Day in 1970, social forces such as the "Ecology" movement, and people such as Rachel Carson and J.I. Rodale. Those who led the way were solidly connected to leaders and thinkers who went before them. Rodale, who was one of the first to describe organic as a way of doing agriculture, was deeply influenced by writings on ancient Chinese agriculture.

Over the years farmers and eaters struggled to define what it meant to be "organic". Could anybody claim their crops were organic just because they didn't spray them this year? Was there a social justice dimension to "organic"? Were organic farmers required to farm in a way that prevented soil erosion?

First, third party certifying agencies emerged. They are intended to be independent auditors of farmers, processors and handlers who assert their products are organic. Independent certifying agencies such as the Minnesota Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA), the Organic Certification Inspection Organization (OCIA), and the California Certified Organic Farmers sprang up across the country. Although the

¹ Macmillian. (2000). Nature. Dictionary of Quotations. Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books.

² Moon, Eric. (2002). Organic versus conventional farming. Retrieved July 2, 2008 from http://www.public.iastate.edu/~ecmoon/org_con.html

³ Organic Trade Association. (2008). Quick overview: Organic agriculture and food production. Retrieved June 12, 2008 from <http://www.ota.com/definition/quickoverview.html>

system of third party auditors inspecting farmers has matured over the years, the concept of independent inspection has remained the same. (Suite101, n.d.)⁴

Establishment of National Organic Standards

The National Organic Trade Association relates how the national organic standards were developed and implemented by the US Congress and the USDA

Setting the stage for U.S. National organic standards, the U.S. Congress adopted the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA) in 1990 as part of the 1990 Farm Bill. This action was followed by over a decade of public input and discussion, which resulted in a National Organic Program final rule published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in December 2000 and implemented in October 2002.

These stringent standards put in place a system to certify that specific practices are used to produce and process organic agricultural ingredients used for food and non-food purposes.

National organic standards set out the methods, practices and substances used in producing and handling crops, livestock and processed agricultural products. The standards include a national list of approved synthetic and prohibited non-synthetic substances for organic production.

National organic standards require that organic growers and handlers be certified by third-party state or private agencies or other organizations that are accredited by USDA. Although farmers and handlers who sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products and retailers that do not process these products are exempt from certification, they must meet all certified organic grower and handler requirements to maintain the organic integrity of the organic products they sell. Anyone who knowingly sells or mislabels as organic a product that was not produced and handled in accordance with the regulations can be subject to a civil penalty of up to \$10,000 per violation. (2008).⁵

The National Organic Standards Board Definition of "Organic"

The following definition of "organic" was passed by the NOSB at its April 1995 meeting in Orlando, FL.

"Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.

'Organic' is a labeling term that denotes products produced under the authority of the Organic Foods Production Act. The principal guidelines for organic production are to use materials and practices that enhance the ecological balance of natural systems and that integrate the parts of the farming system into an ecological whole.

Organic agriculture practices cannot ensure that products are completely free of residues; however, methods are used to minimize pollution from air, soil and water.

⁴ Suite101. (n.d.). Organic food 101. Retrieved June 16, 2008 from <http://www.suite101.com/lesson.cfm/18004/1371>

⁵ Organic Trade Association. (2008). Quick overview: Organic agriculture and food production. Retrieved June 12, 2008 from <http://www.ota.com/definition/quickoverview.html>

Organic food handlers, processors and retailers adhere to standards that maintain the integrity of organic agricultural products. The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people." (2008).⁶

Labeling Foods as 'Organic'

Gail Frank talks about how

New labeling rules may assist consumers by setting standards for organic foods that farmers must follow. The rules may define organic, define a mandatory planning process that requires the use of materials from a restrictive list and establish a producer to verify farming prices.

(2008, page 94, ¶1).⁷

Foods labeled as 'organic' must adhere to the standards set forth by the USDA's National Organic Standards. Foods meeting the certification process are permitted to display the seal of the seal of the National Organic Standards Program.



Source: USDA National Organic Program⁸

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateA&navID=NationalOrganicProgram&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram&page=NOPNationalOrganicProgramHome&acct=nop>

2008. Compiled by K. Cavanaugh

However, just because a food product contains a label indicating the food is 'organic' how can consumers be certain that the food is indeed organic? Tina King says,

How is an organic consumer to know that the "certified organic" label on Country Hen eggs is dubious. It's encouraging the media such as *Acres USA* and *Consumer Reports* are serving as watch dogs. But to date there is very little that an individual can do to actually assure that companies and farmers are held accountable when they assert their products certified organic. (Suite101, n.d.)⁹

⁶ Organic Trade Association. (2008). Quick overview: Organic agriculture and food production. Retrieved June 12, 2008 from <http://www.ota.com/definition/quickoverview.html>

⁷ Frank, G. C. (2007). Community nutrition: Applying Epidemiology to Contemporary Practice. Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

⁸ United States Department of Agriculture. (2008). National Organic Program. Retrieved June 26, 2008 from

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateA&navID=NationalOrganicProgram&leftNav=NationalOrganicProgram&page=NOPNationalOrganicProgramHome&acct=nop>

⁹ Suite101. (n.d.). Organic food 101. Retrieved June 16, 2008 from <http://www.suite101.com/lesson.cfm/18004/1371>

The actual percentage of the food product that is 'organic' may vary. According to Tina King "There are three levels of labels for organic foods:

- Products labeled "100 percent organic" must contain only organically produced raw or processed products excluding water and salt
- Products labeled only "organic" must contain 95 percent organic raw or processed ingredients
- Products containing more than 50 percent organic ingredients can be labeled as "made with organic ingredients" (Suite 101, n.d.)¹⁰

Therefore, "Implied in the marketing of organic foods is that organic products are healthier for consumers than those grown using other method which may not be the case" (Whitney & Rolfes, 2002, page 661, ¶2) ¹¹ Consumers need to read food labels closely as well as use the USDA resources to help them determine if the foods purchased actually meet the certification standards. King suggests,

...the best thing a consumer can do to assure that organic standards are being met for the products they buy is read labels carefully, ask questions of grocers, call consumer phone lines and ask hard questions, educate themselves, and demand accountability at all levels. There's a lot at stake for consumers who care about how their food is grown as well as all other sectors of the organic industry. (Suite101, n.d.)¹²

Marketing of Organic Foods

Food marketing organizations concern themselves with the organic food movement by conducting research and data collection related to consumer trends. A summary from the Natural Marketing Institute *2007 Organic Consumer Trends Report* lists the following topics related to organic consumer trends

- Is it a sign of the times when organic candy bars are found on sale in a prominent counter display at the U.S. House of Representatives snack bar?
- What market pressures are bearing down when supermarket buyers are telling farmers that they will be left behind if they haven't converted to organic within three years?
- Major organic ingredient suppliers don't want to discuss any contracts of less than three years; business is too good and supply still too tight to consider anything less.
- Supermarket chains are competing on a significant scale with Whole Foods, the leading natural foods supermarket chain.
- Competition is heating up and the number of organic product introductions is at an all time high.
- The market for organic products is exploding and yet some cautions still apply; not all categories are mega opportunities.
- Entrepreneurs, as well as leading brands, are questioning how to enter the organic arena in a meaningful way — should they enter under their icon brand or create a new sub-brand?
- What are the real risks and potential R.O.I.?
- Is the household penetration of organic products really growing?
- How are consumers' attitudes changing toward the category?

¹⁰ Suite101. (n.d.). Organic food 101. Retrieved June 16, 2008 from <http://www.suite101.com/lesson.cfm/18004/1371>

¹¹ Whitney, E.N., Rolfes, S. R. (2002). *Understanding nutrition*. Ninth Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomsen Learning.

¹² Suite101. (n.d.). Organic food 101. Retrieved June 16, 2008 from <http://www.suite101.com/lesson.cfm/18004/1371>

(2007)¹³

Gail Frank points to survey results from the National Center for Public Policy Research who consumers may not 'buy in' to the claim that labeling organic foods correlates to positive consumer perceptions. The research study reached the conclusion that "...labeling organic food products "will seriously mislead consumers into thinking the products are safer, better in quality or more nutritious." (2008, page 94, ¶2).¹⁴ This directly affects the marking of organic foods because consumers who do not see organic foods as safer for the environment or containing more nutrition will not purchase those products.

According to David Walker's Web article, *Mass Marketing Organic Food*

A wide range of benefits is claimed for organic food which could provide the marketing men with exploitable opportunities. More than enough scientific evidence has been "found," variously disputing and supporting these claims, to create confusion and the opportunity for value adding spin. (2001)¹⁵

Marketing efforts related to organic food products is big business. According to Sify Business (2006), "The growing demand for organic food and drink in the world market is expected to push up sales to \$40 billion in 2006."¹⁶ Another Web article from Boulder, Colorado points out "Sales of natural products, organic foods booming" and "American shoppers spent more than \$51 billion on natural and organic products in 2005" (Environmental News Service, 2006).¹⁷

Summary

The organic food movement involves many aspects – from the historical to the present and includes establishment of organic food standards by the USDA to ensure that food producers label organically grown food products appropriately. Questions exist, at least in the minds of consumers as to whether organically grown food is safer for ingestion, the environment and provides increased nutrients in spite of intensive marketing efforts by food producers.

¹³ Natural Marking Institute. (2008). Research reports: Organic consumer trends report. Retrieved June 23, 2008 from http://www.nmisolutions.com/r_organic.html

¹⁴ Frank, G. C. (2007). Community nutrition: Applying Epidemiology to Contemporary Practice. Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

¹⁵ Walker, D. (2001). Mass marketing organic food. Retrieved June 17, 2008 from <http://www.openi.co.uk/oi010130.htm>

¹⁶ Sify Business. (2006). Sales of organic foods to top \$ 40 b by year-end. Retrieved July 1, 2008 from <http://sify.com/finance/fullstory.php?id=14336469>

¹⁷ Environmental News Service. (2006). Sales of Natural Products, Organic Foods Booming. Retrieved June 18, 2008 from <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2006/2006-06-06-09.asp#anchor1>