



Across the Nation

SHOULD WE SWITCH TO ORGANIC FOOD?

Submitted by: Paul Fairbrook

Introduction

Up to recently, it was my opinion that to spend an extra three dollars on an "organic" chicken was a waste of money, and that the superiority in taste of such chickens was merely a figment of the imagination of an overexcited food groupie.

However, I have since come to the conclusion that there is, indeed, much substance to the benefits of organic foods, and that continued genetic engineering in foods could lead to serious health problems in future generations.

A. The Trouble with Pesticides and Genetically Modified Foods (GMO's).

GMO seeds have been developed for wheat, soybeans and even for cotton. Genetic engineering has gone so far as to introduce a gene from a pig into corn seed, or other growth hormones into rice. Tomatoes and strawberries have been engineered with fish genes to keep them viable at colder temperatures¹. Conventionally grown apples are sprayed with 32 different pesticides, as are grapes from Chile. The top nine foods containing the most pesticides are: Bell peppers, Spinach, Cherries, Peaches, Mexican Cantaloupes, Celery, Apples, Apricots and Green beans.²

B. The Danger of Growth Hormones to Cows and to Humans.

GMO's have not been confined to plants, however, through the introduction of growth hormones in the 1980's, Salmon, Tilapia and Carp have been genetically modified, Cows have been given growth hormones which changes the taste of the milk¹, and scientists have gone so far as to experiment with growth hormones to create larger mice, to make the skin of cows smoother and to double the size of some fish.¹

Recent research indicates that children, in particular, can benefit from an organic food diet, while they may suffer disproportionately from the pesticides consumed from conventionally grown foods.

A fairly recent danger to the health of humans arose in 1996 with the epidemic of mad cow disease (BSE) in England and other parts of Europe.

The World Health Organization has called for a total worldwide ban on feeding any animal tissue to livestock. With people who suffer from food allergies, it is especially important that they follow a diet of organically produced meats, fruits and vegetables, since their liver is often not able to breakdown the chemicals and proteins from pesticide-treated foods.³

In the February 2006 issue of Consumer Reports, the writers summarize the health risks of conventionally produced foods in this way:

- 1. Pesticides are dangerous to fetuses, toxic to the brain, and to children generally whose developing immune, central-nervous and hormonal systems are especially vulnerable to damage from toxic chemicals.*
- 2. Hormones. Synthetic growth hormones may be carcinogenic and may be linked to the precocious onset of puberty in girls. The USDA bans the use of such hormones in all poultry (organic or not) but not when it comes to hogs, beef, or dairy cattle. Only organic producers are legally bound not to use them.*
- 3. Antibiotics. Farmers widespread use of antibiotics to speed up animals' growth...has helped spawn antibiotic-resistant bacteria.*
- 4. Other toxins. Non-organic foods can expose you to a range of other contaminants with potential health risks. Conventionally raised chickens, for example, eat feed that contains neurotoxins, such as arsenic or heavy metals. And the animals' feed may be dipped in motor oil as a treatment for an ailment known as scaly leg mite.⁴*

continued on page 13

continued from page 12

C. The Trouble over Standards.

According to Consumers Reports, organic-sounding labels can be confusing and even meaningless. In the February 2006 issue of the magazine, it describes various labels and their meanings as follows:

100% Organic. No synthetic ingredients are allowed by law. Also, production processes must meet federal organic standards and must have been independently verified by accredited inspectors.

Organic. At least 95 percent of ingredients are organically produced. The remainder can be no organic or synthetic ingredients. One exception: Organic labels on seafood are meaningless because the U.S. Department of Agriculture has no standards to back them up.

Made with Organic Ingredients. At least 70 percent of ingredients are organic. The remaining 30 percent must come from USDA's approved list.

Meaningless. "Free-range or "free-roaming". Stamped on eggs, chicken or other meat, this label suggests that an animal has spent a good portion of its life outdoors. But the U.S. government standards are weak. For example, if a chicken coop door was open for just 5 minutes a day, regardless of whether or not the chickens went outside, the animal's meat and eggs could legally be labeled "free range".

Natural or All natural. This label does not mean organic. No standard definition for this term exists.⁴

D. Cost Comparisons

The difference in prices between organic and non-organic foods is considerable. Consumer Reports explains it this way:

"Organic sticker shock can hit the most stalwart of organic shoppers. The fact is that organic farmers produce more labor-intensive products and don't enjoy the economics of scale or government subsidies that their big brothers in agribusiness do."

As a matter of fact, the cost of deciding to buy only organically produced foods is considerable. The following is a price comparison between organic and non-organic foods made at a Safeway store on March 5, 2006:

Item	Non-Organic	Organic Price	% Difference
Navel Oranges	0.79/lb	1.19/lb	49%
Grapefruit	0.50/lb	1.19/lb	138%
Apples, Gala or Fuji	1.29/lb	1.59/lb	23%
Carrots, peeled	1.50/lb	2.29/lb	60%
Cauliflower	1.99/ea	2.39/ea	20%
Cucumbers	0.99/ea	1.29/ea	30%
Fruit and Vegetables - Total Price Difference			75%
Egg, Large, Grade A	1.99/dz	4.09/dz	105%
Milk 2%	3.98/gal	8.18/gal	110%

In fairness it should be stated that the organic milk tasted better (richer, more creamy) than the regular milk.

E. The Organic Food "Revolution".

The reasons stated by respondents to a government survey are as follows: Avoidance of pesticides (73%), Freshness (68.3%), Health and Nutrition (67%), to avoid genetically engineered foods (55%), "Better for my health" (52.8%), "Better for the environment" (52.4%).

F. Sustainability and Ecological Vision

In deciding whether or not to purchase organic foods, aside from the benefits to one's health, there are also benefits to the entire planet that conscientious consumers should consider. The Organic Trade Association recently stated this point of view succinctly, as follows:

When you purchase a pound of butter or a quart of yogurt labeled as USDA Organic, you're getting a healthful, premium product that you can feel good about serving to your family. But you're also supporting a system of agriculture that is environmentally sound, and which assures the health and future productivity of both animals and land.

When you purchase an organic product, you're supporting organic agriculture, a production method which strives to maintain biological diversity while replenishing soil fertility and eliminating the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Because the husbandry practiced by organic farmers require a level of attentiveness and care incompatible with industrialized dairy operations, you're also supporting farmers who work with the health of their animals in mind".⁵

continued on page 14

10 Good Reasons to Go Organic⁶

- 1. Organic products meet stringent standards*
- 2. Organic food tastes great!*
- 3. Organic production reduces health risks*
- 4. Organic farms respect our water resources*
- 5. Organic farmers build healthy soil*
- 6. Organic farmers work in harmony with nature*
- 7. Organic producers are leaders in innovative research*
- 8. Organic producers strive to preserve diversity*
- 9. Organic farming helps keep rural communities healthy.*
- 10. Organic abundance- Foods and non-foods alike!*

G. Conclusion.

The more one reads about organic foods, the more one begins to understand. Aside from the arguments about health, biodiversity, and ecological imperatives, there is also the matter of taste! In a

blind test comparing organic versus regular milk, it is clear that the organic milk tastes much better, smoother, creamier than its regular counterpart. While I may not yet be fully convinced to steer towards bankruptcy by buying only organic foods, I am certainly driving in the right direction and that, after only a little research, is no small accomplishment.

*** * * * ***

(1) Life Running Out of Control, Bullfrog Films, Oley, PA. ISBN 1-59458-087-1

(2) Your Organic Kitchen, Jesse Ziff Cool, Rodale Cookbooks, 2000, p. 10 ISBN 1-57954-166-6

(3) Why Buy Organic? Rosalind Ryan, The Independent, Web.Lexis-nexis.com

(4) When it Pays to Buy Organic, Consumers Reports, February 2006, pp. 12-17

(5) Why Buy Organic Dairy Products? Organic Trade Association, www.ota.com/Organic-Dairy-Products

(6) 10 Good Reasons To Go Organic, Organic Trade Association, www.ota.com/organic-and-you/10-reasons