

Voting... With a Wallet?

kay, so just when you think you've gotten things Ostraight, yikes!, here comes another report that flies in the face of what you learned six days, six months, or six years ago. In the financial realm, you tucked away any extra savings instead of paying off your mortgage. But now the pundits propose that you do the opposite: treat that long-term note like a tick on the dog—get rid of it, fast!—then fund the bank account. And you gave up eating nuts, thinking they were laden with fat and not any good for you? Back up the shopping cart, a host of new studies shows that (in moderate quantity) they are actually a "super food" and that it behooves you to consume them daily! From health care to finances to physical fitness to what color we should paint our kitchens, seemingly contradictory information assails us on a daily basis. What's a person to do? Adopt an ostrich stance and stick her head in the sand? Oh, but that's not true either (ostriches don't do that) . . . reports prove otherwise!

It shouldn't come as a huge surprise, then, that all of a sudden, "eating organic" should find itself under a cloak of mystery and in a puddle of muddle. Is being "certified organic" a guarantee that the food is as "pure" as we think it is and that its production was done in a manner that not only yields a safer and more healthful source of nutrition for us, but that also was done in an environmentally-friendly way? Just what does the term mean when you can now get organic coffee at McDonald's restaurants? Has an intruder meddled in our romance with organics?

These questions may sound strange coming from ABC Farm, as we've long been an advocate for and promoter of organic foods. And let's get this straight right up front: we still are . . . but can we insert a little asterisk after that? Because with the new organic standards—including (and particularly in light of) a provision just added in the Agriculture Department's fiscal 2006 budget—the word now has as many shades and nuances to it as there are varieties of lettuce. We think that buying organic should be part of an informed selection process, but not necessarily the sole criterion.

When we speak of organic farming, we are talking about agricultural *practices* as well as the actual fruits and vegetables grown. Underlying the methods of raising produce without chemical fertilizers and herbicides is the fundamental tenet that the earth in which it is grown is tended with care, that the soil is constantly and conscientiously treated so that its fertility and vitality are, in fact, enhanced.

And when we are considering organic meats, it goes beyond being sure that the animals are fed only organic feed and are not given antibiotics and hormones. It means that they are treated with respect, are cared for in a gentle and kind manner, and that they have a comfortable place to live, plenty of room to move about, and ready access to fresh air.

But if you go by the strict definition of "organic," as established by the USDA, these assumptions don't necessarily hold true. An organic carrot could easily have been grown on a 1000-acre monoculture farm that exhausted the soil's nutrients, been picked by a migrant worker who labored under harsh conditions, and then was shipped 2000 miles in a truck to arrive at your grocer's several days after it was harvested. Or perhaps that organic milk was from a cow that rarely enjoyed fresh green pasture, even when it was available.

Again, let's be clear here: we don't want to bifurcate the food world into the camps of organic and nonorganic and patently assign the labels of "good" and "bad" to them. What we do want to do is point out that there is more to "organic" than what is implied at face value, and the term is going to get a bit more obfuscated now that this (or other provisions down the road) get passed. Further, we want to remind you that you, as a consumer, can have a mighty heavy hand when it comes to impacting the food production system in this country.

Instead of considering only a product's label when deciding if we want to buy it, perhaps we should take into account where, how, and by whom it was grown or processed. Did it come from a local farm or did it travel transcontinental? Did the person who grew (made) it have a vested interest in how it was grown? Was it part of a diverse farm, or was it one of a million of the same variety? Was the animal reared in a healthy environment, and did it have a good quality of life? Or was it raised as if it were a mushroom: in a dark, dank environment and with little personal contact (unless it were an organic mushroom on a family farm, that is!)? And if farmhands were involved in the process, did they work under safe conditions, receive a fair wage, and get treated with dignity?

As indicated on the chart in the companion article, many of the organic foods that were originally brought to us by small-scale companies are now, in fact, under the auspices of huge corporations. The individual identities have been consumed through a feast of mergers and acquisitions. This chart begs the questions, Are industrial giants delving into the organic market because they have the best (or even the better?) interests of us and the earth at heart? Or is it because "organic" has become a new profit center for them?

Where, as the buyer, do you come in, and what sort of influence can you have? Every time you make a purchase, you can "vote" with your wallet. In our demand-driven market, buying free-range beef is a vote for humanely raised cows and a vote

against stockyard practices; an apple-lopsided and spotty-from the nearby orchard is a vote for spray-free fruit (whether or not it is "certified organic") and one against importing pesticide-laden Galas from across the country or the other side of the globe. If you buy jam made in the community kitchen down the road or from a family-owned company, you are casting your ballot for a regional economy and smaller, individual businesses instead of for huge corporations and conglomerations. Remember: a demand for a product creates a market for it and, hence, encourages its production (and thereby, eventually, reduces its price); rejection of a product or methodology diminishes its appeal and discourages the continuation of it.

One more thought on buying decisions. What is the true cost of what we purchase? In the long run, is the \$2 bottle of chain-store honey less expensive than the \$5 one from the regional business or local beekeeper? The answer is yes... *and* no. Yes, in that it takes three fewer bills out of your pocket. No, in that it probably had to be transported a great distance, consuming fossil fuels along the way; it continues the demand for industrially-produced goods and the corporate mind-set; and it doesn't circulate money in the regional economy. Having said that, we fully recognize that each person and family has its own budget constraints and must operate within those. Maybe all your grocery list can't be filled with local or fair-trade items, but if even a portion of it is, you have helped take a stand and sent a message about what you believe is important. It may not seem like doing much, leaving one brand of peanut butter on the shelf in favor of putting another in your basket, but the accumulation of all those votes does have a big impact.

Without making grocery shopping turn into an over-analytical ordeal, each of us can develop his or her own "shopping hierarchy": decide what is more or most important—local; certified organic; knowing it was from a small-scale farm, regardless of certification; nationally-known brand; price; whatever—and then mix-and-match those parameters so that you are comfortable with your selections.

Even more, take the time to become educated about the foods and goods you buy. Investigate alternative sources (see sidebar). Join a Community Supported Agriculture program. Get involved.

Share your findings with others. Develop a plan, that works for you and your family. Cast your vote . . . and enjoy your meal!

Farmers' Markets and Local Growers

Support local farmers and growers in your area! By buying their goods and produce, you can:

- help make farming a sustainable and viable way of life for small-scale and/or family farms
- help preserve open land and the rural character of the region
- reduce fuel consumption (why transport carrots across the country?)
- enjoy fruits, vegetables, and other foods at their height of freshness (which makes them both more nutritious and delicious)
- "vote" against large-scale, industrial agribusiness and mono-culture methods
- get to know the people who bring you your food

For more information on the Greenmarkets in New York City, you can visit its website at www.cency.org and click on "Greenmarket" on the navigation bar.

To find farmers' markets in New York: <http://www.agrnkt.state.ny.us> and click on "farm and market search." In Massachusetts: <http://www.mass.gov/agr/massgrown/>

Organizations such as Berkshire Grown (berkshirerown.org) or Regional Farm & Food Project (farnandfood.org) can help you find a market, Community Support Agriculture program, or farm in your area to support. Contact your area's Chamber of Commerce for advice or do some research on the Internet.

Forming a connection to a farm and farmer makes everyone a winner!