



You are what you eat

Going organic: more than a diet, it's a lifestyle

By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 08/12/2010

"The chief pleasure in eating does not consist in costly seasoning, or exquisite flavor, but in yourself."
— Horace (65-8 B.C.)

Eating and drinking is an activity that connects humankind. No matter where we live, we all depend on water and the earth beneath our feet to sustain our lives. In essence, we are conduits, channels that energy (life) and water flow through, and that life energy is passed down from one generation to the next. A part of that energy is directly affected by what we eat. So if the age-old adage "You are what you eat" is true, there may be some merit in looking closely at what we consume and staying well-informed.

With a desire to educate about and promote alternate healthy food choices, and to preserve our earth, the organic food industry is in crescendo mode today. Where once organic products could be found only at health food stores or local produce stands, organic has become an inescapable reality, since nearly every food corporation now has an organic division. More capital is going into organic agriculture than ever before. Walmart is at the top of the list of large corporations that announced plans in 2006 to double their stock of organic products, including produce, dairy and textiles.

Rose Hayden-Smith, the county director for the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, says, "Organics have become mainstream, and they are becoming more popular, because there is increasing consumer demand." Not only are we seeing organic products

show up in large food corporations, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently celebrated Earth Day by turning a six-acre tract on the National Mall into an organic garden. Hayden-Smith says, "This has breathtaking and significant implications for the organic movement. Lincoln created the USDA, declaring it to be 'the largest interest of the nation.' "

In a recent interview on MSNBC, New York Times author Michael Pollan said, "Organic food is a good investment."



The

history of organic farming in the United States dates back to the early part of the 20th century, with concerns over the use of hydrogen cyanide and arsenic-based pesticides. However, these pesticides were soon toxic and ineffective replaced by synthetic organic (carbon-containing) compounds and DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane).

For about 20 years, all seemed well. DDT was the agricultural industry's dream — beefing up profits while yielding more for less and controlling the pests. However, not everyone in the agriculture industry was smitten.

Organic pioneer and author J.I. Rodale began studying the relationship among healthy soil, healthy food and healthy people. With an educated concern about the effects of chemically treated farming, and a personal mission to develop practical methods of rebuilding natural soil fertility, the Rodale Institute was founded in 1947.

Organics is not something that came in with the counterculture movement of the 1960s, nor is it a new-fangled notion that spread from food co-op to co-op during the late 1970s.

In 1954, Rodale said, "Organics is not a fad. It has been a long-established practice – much more firmly grounded than the current chemical flair. Present agriculture practices are leading us downhill."

The uneasiness continued to mount over the short- and long-term effects that pesticides might have on humankind and the environment, and by 1962 scientist Rachel Carson's best seller, *Silent Spring*, hit the bookstores with a bang, as she predicted a colossal destruction of the planet's

ecosystems unless something was done to stop the “rain of chemicals.” Some environmentalists today believe that this book actually launched the environmental movement.

Did Carson and Rodale have predictive insight into the future? It is certainly hard to dismiss the many concerns about our ecosystem and the long-term effects that pesticides may have on humanity and wildlife at large.

Dr. Don Rodriguez, the associate professor holding the chair in the Environmental Science and Resource Management Program at California State University, Channel Islands, says, “One of the things we are realizing is that the short-term ramifications are a problem, but they are not as insidious as long-term exposure. Studies of this really came into play after the Vietnam War, with Agent Orange exposure, and we were made aware of the risk of long-term disease.”

Chemicals and the environment

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation (CDPR) says, “People often think pesticide means insecticide. Pesticide refers not only to insecticides but also many other kinds of chemicals. Under state and federal law, a pesticide is any substance intended to control, destroy, repel or attract a pest.” Because certain insects and other organisms carry diseases like West Nile virus, farmers and other health agencies use pesticides to destroy pests, viruses and germs.

“California has the largest number of certified organic operations in the United States,” says Al Montana, president of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture (CDFA).” Because organic farming has become such a good investment, the state wants organic agriculture to thrive. “Oversight by CDFA and certifier compliance with established rules ensures that we enjoy a vibrant organic industry in California,” he says.



However, while the CDPR is concerned with regulation and protection, there is no denying that the use of toxic chemicals to control, destroy and repel pests is having adverse effects on humanity, wildlife and the environment. If change is not implemented, where is this going to end?

Organic food is good for a body, but it also helps protect wildlife and the environment. Timothy LaSalle, CEO of the Rodale Institute dedicated to pioneering organic farming through research and outreach,

believes that turning all of our farmland to organic in this country could alleviate 25 percent of our emissions.

In addition to organic farming, many growers are also striving for sustainable agriculture, which advocates using renewable resources and conserving soil and water to boost the quality of the environment. Sustainable agriculture focuses on conserving an ecological balance by avoiding the depletion of natural resources. It is ecologically sound and economically practical at so many levels.

Local organic grower Phil McGrath of McGrath Family Farms, which has been serving Ventura County for five generations, says, "I would like to think that we are sustainable, but I don't think there is a sustainable farm on the planet yet. It is evolving. Sustainable farming takes in every aspect. The three pillars of sustainability are economics, social equity and environment."

McGrath says, "I started strong with direct marketing back in 1978, and I really believe that farmers markets have distributed organics better than anyone. Prior to that, we had little road stands. In the last 10 years or so, the word 'sustainable' has come into play, and it really is making people much more aware of eating local – getting to know your growers."

Shopping locally and getting to know the growers is an excellent way to stay informed and be more certain of what you are actually eating. While organic is the healthier choice, there are some variables that come into play with shopping at large food corporations. In California, we are fortunate to live in a state that grows so much fresh produce, but this is not the case in much of the United States. One of the issues with purchasing from larger food corporations is the fact that some of their produce is coming from other countries. In America, the standards for organics are stringent, but every country is different, so while we hope we are getting something pure, that may not necessarily be the case.

Rodriguez says, "Shopping from local growers, like the farmers market, is a great way to put a face with the food, talk with the growers and learn how the food is produced, and support community agriculture. Not that we need to take all the industrial production out of agriculture, but industrial agriculture is such a different enterprise than the small farm wanting to serve the customer and community better, because the focus of production in industrial agriculture is very high. The way they have always solved issues is with pesticides, fertilizers and water. Grow more for less."

The concerns surrounding pesticides and the effects of these chemicals on our ecosystem are many, but equally concerning are the effects that these toxic pesticides are having on our health.

Jonathan D. Lemler, D.C., has been the director of the Healing Arts Center in Oxnard for 27 years and specializes in nutritional elements. He suggests that a myriad of health issues can result from eating nonorganic foods because of the pesticides, food enhancers and hormones. Lemler says, "Pesticides actually mimic estrogen in the body, clogging up the liver, and then they're stored in the fat tissues, placing a major burden on the liver, and is the main cause of fatty liver indigestion. In addition, they get clogged in the brain and then become acidic. Acidity causes inflammation, infection and disease. Pesticides really screw up hormones."

Along with hormonal issues and liver function, Lemler added obesity to the mix, partly attributing it to a result of liver congestion and clogging of the pesticides in the system.

In addition, genetically modified foods also pose serious health issues, with corn being the chief offender, not to mention the antibiotics and hormones found in animal products.

A growing number of scientists believe that many hormone-related diseases, degenerative diseases and certain types of cancers are related to pesticides, whether ingested through food or breathed in the air. In addition, the journal *Pediatrics* recently published the results of a study linking the correlation between pesticides and learning and behavior disorders, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). According to a report issued by the University of South Florida,

“Exposure of the developing child to even the small levels of common everyday chemicals can result in learning or behavior problems evident throughout life.”

Paying the price

A recent study at the University of Washington shows that millions of Americans simply cannot afford to eat healthily. While the cost of eating organic might be higher, in the long run the expense might be worthwhile if doctor visits and the need for prescription medication are significantly reduced.

Craig Ahrens, the president and marketing director of Earth Café Living Foods, which is a fast-growing raw, organic, vegan cheesecake producer based in Southern California, began eating organic/vegan back in 2004. While he and his family were always “good eaters,” they lived on the typical American diet. His conversion to eating more healthily happened as a result of his business involvement with Candida Tolentino, the chef and visionary who began Earth Café Living Foods. As a child, Tolentino suffered with chronic illness that kept her frequently visiting the doctor and taking antibiotics. While Tolentino’s switch to vegan eating was directly related to her health issues, Ahrens’ was not. At the time Earth Café got its start, he was not fully persuaded that eating this way was necessary. According to Ahrens, “It was actually my daughter who helped convince me to make the change, and once we did, we never looked back!”

Ahrens says, “Since weight or health issues did not fuel my decision to eat vegan and organic, I did not notice much change immediately, except my energy levels were higher. What was amazing, though, was after a year or so of not eating animal products, my children did not need to be rushed off to the doctor, nor did I have to make trips to the drug store to grab Robitussin for runny noses. Ahrens says, “There was a noticeable decline in monies spent on doctor visits and medications.”

There is no doubt that eating organic is the healthier option. Ahrens says, “Organic is a lifestyle, not just a label. It’s so much bigger than that. It’s an environmentally conscious choice. If we want good health and want to live free, then we must choose wisely. People should take the time to investigate this more, instead of just being ruled by the food industry.”

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