

answer to the question: **Are they really better for you?**

Organic appeal

By Molly Kimball
Contributing writer

Allen Frantz is a self-proclaimed all-or-nothing zealot when it comes to food and nutrition. His standard diet consists of fast food, Chinese takeout and fried shrimp po-boys. But during periods when he watches his diet closely, he stops at the market almost daily to pick up organic meat, milk, produce, even organic cookies.

"It's pretty far out of my way, but I do it because I think it's better for me," said the 40-year-old Destrehan resident. "But sometimes I wonder if organic's really better, if it's worth the extra money, not to mention the travel time to get there."

Frantz isn't the only consumer confused by the proliferation of high-end health food stores and the increasing availability — and often the increased cost — of organic products on supermarket shelves. All of which begs the question: Is organic really better for you?

The answer can be as confusing as the various labels themselves. Which is to say: in some ways, yes; in some ways, not really; and in many ways, it's more about conscience than science.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture describes organic foods as those "produced without most conventional pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, genetic engineering, or irradiation" by "environmentally aware farmers who emphasize renewable resources and conserving soil and water."

Organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products are further defined as those that "come from animals that are given no antibiotics or growth hormones."

See **ORGANIC**, C-2

For now, the evidence just does not exist that organic foods are nutritionally superior.

How organic is it?

Product bears USDA organic seal: At least 95 percent of ingredients have been certified organic.

No seal, but described as 'organic': At least 70 percent of ingredients have been certified organic.

Organic used only on back panel to describe ingredients: Less than 70 percent of ingredients have been certified organic.



STAFF
ILLUSTRATION
BY KENNETH
HARRISON

Definition of 'organic' tough to crack

ORGANIC,
from C-1

Before a product receives the USDA's official organic seal, at least 95 percent of its ingredients must be certified organic. If the USDA finds that a product contains at least 70 percent organic ingredients, then the word organic can be used in the description of the product (such as "salsa made with organic tomatoes") but it may not display the seal. Products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients can use the word organic only on the back panel in the ingredient list.

But the USDA leaves unanswered the question on most shoppers' minds: Is it more nutritious?

"Some studies show that the nutrient density of organically farmed soil is greater, which could increase the nutrient density of the crops grown," said Luddene Perry, co-author of "A Field Guide to Buying Organic." "But for now, the evidence just does not exist that organic foods are nutritionally superior."

Nor are they pesticide-free, as many consumers believe.

"The reality is that organic farmers can and do use pesticides," Perry said, "just not synthetic chemical pesticides."

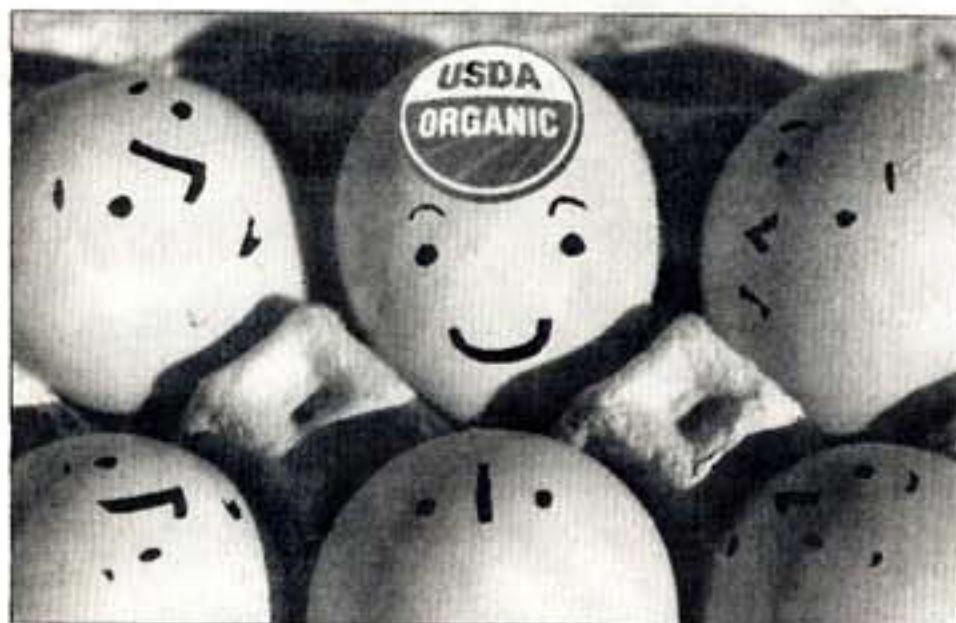
Chemical pesticides are a concern because some have been associated with certain types of cancer. Other potential medical problems have been associated with growth hormones given to cattle to increase size and milk production.

Dr. Heber Dunaway of the Fertility Institute of New Orleans said there is credible evidence that added chemicals and growth hormones can affect the human body's hormones, perhaps contributing to an earlier onset of sexual development as well as decreased fertility.

There is also concern that routine use of antibiotics, which are used in conventional livestock to keep animals healthy and enhance their growth, could contribute to the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. In organic livestock, a sick animal is first treated with organic-approved medications. If a farmer has to use antibiotics, the animal loses its organic status.

"The reality is that organic farmers can and do use pesticides, just not synthetic chemical pesticides."

LUDDENE PERRY, co-author of "A Field Guide to Buying Organic."



Organic regulations also prohibit feeding animal parts back to the same species of animal (a contributing factor in the spread of mad cow disease), so "organic beef is somewhat safer than conventional when it comes to risk of mad cow," Perry said. In addition, there are specific guidelines regulating animals' living conditions, as well as humane transportation and slaughter practices.

With the USDA's emphasis on animal welfare, renewable resources and sustainable agriculture environment, organic farming appeals to many environmentally conscious consumers. But large-scale organic industry can still take its toll on the soil, the air and the natural diversity of crops and wildlife habitats. If the environment is your primary concern, then buying local is your best bet, Perry said.

"It's the only way to consistently minimize the transportation effects, the pollution and the pressures on the environment," she said.

"Buying local connects the consumer and the producer, physically, economically, intellectually. It strengthens the sense of community, and is much better for the environment."

What's considered local? Anything grown or produced within a 200-mile radius, said Corbin Evans, executive chef and instructor at The Savvy Gourmet and president of MarketUmbrella.org, an organization that oversees various markets and programs, including the Crescent City Farmers Market.

In New Orleans, available local products range from cheese and eggs to flowers and seafood. They are generally found at area farmers markets as well as

some grocery stores, although smaller, independently owned grocers are more likely to sell local products than large chains.

"As a chef, I prefer to buy local at the market because I know I'm getting stuff that's fresher, and I know where it's coming from," Evans said. "I'm helping to sustain local farmers, fishermen, shrimpers."

Evans' advice to consumers: "Be flexible in your cooking. Adapt your recipes to what's available seasonally." Since buying local is not always possible, he said, "The next best option is organic, although it may cost two to four times as much as local."

Buying locally produced goods not only benefits our environment and community, it also can result in more appetizing meals, since many people find such products both fresher and tastier.

"Grass-fed, locally produced cheese often has a superior taste and 'meltability,' even more so than organic cheese, which certainly still holds its own," Perry said. "To compare these to conventional cheese almost seems unfair. The products really resemble each other in name only."

In our fast-paced society, consumers often look for a quick reference guide to what's best to buy in its organic or local form, and what they can buy in conventional form. It's not that simple, Perry said.

"I tend to shy away from categorizing foods into lists," she said. "It can discourage people from eating foods that are healthy for them, if they don't want to pay more money for the organic variety. And there can be so much variation, even

within the same type of food. People can get a false sense of security with lists."

Instead, Perry offers a few fundamental guidelines to best take care of your body — and save money.

"Shop the perimeter of the store," she said. "Produce, meat, dairy — that's fresh good stuff, whole and unprocessed. Move in toward the center of the store, and you'll find that most of those things, your body really doesn't need."

Don't judge a product solely by the bold print on the front of the package. Take the time to read the labels, to see what's really in there. When you see organic toaster pastries, she said, you realize that even food laden with empty calories can be labeled "organic."

And the quickest way to shave money from your food budget? "Learn to cook!" Perry said.

At the end of the day, whether organic is worth the extra money and effort may depend more on each person's values, beliefs and budget than any objective nutritional analysis.

"It ultimately depends on what your priorities are," Perry said. "You've got to figure out what's most important to you."

Molly Kimball is a registered dietitian in New Orleans.