

Organic claims not always accurate

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

In an effort to live a more environmentally friendly lifestyle, consumers have embraced organic foods in record numbers. They stand behind the idea that organic products are not only better for them but also better for the planet.

But the claims that organic food is safer, healthier and more eco-friendly may be more hype than fact. Some organic foods are not all that they seem to be, and when people dig for the dirt on “organic,” they might be surprised at what they find.

The variety of organic products available at specialty food stores and more traditional supermarkets has increased considerably. Food purists and environmentalists support this growing trend.

Certified organic foods are grown without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms or ionizing radiation. Organically produced meats are from animals that do not take antibiotics or growth hormones to produce heartier cuts.

The USDA National Organic Program sees to it that organic foods meet these stringent requirements and also that any companies that handle or process organic food before it gets to the supermarket or restaurant are certified as well.

However, consumers who embrace organic products might not be getting what they think they are. The term “organic” conjures up images of local produce stands and farmers diligently caring for their crops. However, as organic foods have grown in popularity and the organic food industry has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, the methods of bringing these foods to a neighborhood store have changed.

While consumers may believe that organic broccoli was trucked in from a farm down the road, it actually may have traveled thousands of miles—negating many environmental benefits in the process.

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Many smaller organic businesses have felt the pressure to keep up with mainstream foods and have joined the ranks of commercial food production. In fact, some smaller companies have actually been bought out by large food giants.

Organic Cow, a Vermont milk producer, now operates under the auspices of Horizon, a company based in Colorado. Cascadian Farm, which produces organic frozen dinners among other items, is a subsidiary of General Mills. Many mainstream food companies have their own organic alter egos, which would no doubt surprise consumers who support the organic food movement.

Even true organic foods shipped from small farms over short distances may not be able to meet the hype of the organic moniker. Plant physiologist and biologist Alex Avery's 2007 book titled "The Truth About Organic Foods" talks about origins of organic food and dispels some of the myths that prevail.

Avery notes that organic foods are not pesticide-free because all vegetables contain about five percent of their weight in natural pesticides, some of which may be just as potent as manmade varieties.

Avery also notes that more than 95 percent of conventional meat and dairy products in the United States are totally free of antibiotics and 99.5 percent of it is free of synthetic hormones. Only one sample in 400 violates the antibiotic limits set by the FDA.

Avery also states that there are no nutritional differences between organic and conventionally produced foods, which debunks the myth that organic foods are more nutritionally sound.

Organic foods also may contribute to a higher carbon footprint. Instead of using chemical fertilizers to feed produce, the use of animal manure may mean clearing out land for grazing and creating its own problems in off-gassing and water contamination that has been associated with raising livestock.

Furthermore, the U.K. Department of Environment and Rural Affairs states, "A shift towards a

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local food system, and away from a supermarket-based food system with its central distribution depots, lean supply chains and big, full trucks, might actually increase the number of food-vehicle miles being traveled locally, because things would move around in a larger number of smaller, less efficiently packed vehicles.”

Champions of organic foods are sure to stand by the claims that organic foods are better. Many organic foods are nutritionally sound and rely on more natural growing methods. Yet consumers should keep an open mind about both organic foods and their commercially produced counterparts.

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