



What does “organic” really mean?

The word “organic” has proved to be one of the most powerful words in today’s supermarket. But what, people always ask me, does it mean? For many, it means food coming from an idyllic little local family farm where no pesticides or chemical fertilizers are used and where the little animals roam free and happy, at least that is, until they are slaughtered. The food is perceived to be safer, more nutritious and grown more “sustainably,” whatever that means.

I’m sorry to say that very few of the foods with “organic” labels come anywhere near meeting this perception. The reality is that, unlike the original concept, the vast majority of “organic” foods today are produced outside Canada on large industrial farms and shipped thousands of miles before getting to your table. In the battle between Big Organic and Little Organic over the past decade, Big won – small-scale farms cannot meet the demands of a Walmart. These large industrial organic corporations use plenty of pesticides such as rotenone, pyrethrum and nicotine sulphate. And certainly, there is no real evidence that “organic” food is safer, more nutritious or tastier.

Why, then, do otherwise intelligent people pay \$1.09 per pound for little black overripe bananas when they can get lovely big yellow ones for 79 cents? They are buying 79 cents worth of bananas and 30 cents worth of what the economists call “psychic income.” “Organic” is more about philosophy than science.

But this is not to say that consumers shouldn’t make food choices

based on philosophy, considering how confusing the science is. As we saw in last month’s column, “Chemical Paranoia,” many consumers are scientific illiterates who think that all chemicals are synthetic and therefore, for them, the fact that 99.99 per cent of the pesticides we eat are natural is a distinction that is meaningless. The abundance of misinformation in the popular press means that, for many, the more they read the less they know. These hundreds of wellness magazines and websites have created a whole new group of orthorexics – people with an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating. Moreover, considering the fact that most of the nutritional advice we have received over the last half century from nutritionists has been utterly contradictory or has actually made us less healthy (replace fats in our diet with carbohydrates, for example), then no wonder the poor consumer is confused by the science and might as well buy on the basis of philosophy if that is how they want to spend their money. After all, most organic food is not going to hurt you, although, it must be said, many of our largest food safety crises in recent years came from spinach, sprouts and lettuce that were all certified “organic,” as were all the “organic” peanuts that were laced with Salmonella and sickened so many people in the last couple months all over North America.

From the beginning there has always been a widespread problem with the credibility of the “organic” claim. Unscrupulous producers took unfair advantage of farmers who tried to do things differently, and fraud at the retail level was fairly rampant. A

few years ago a health food store in my neighbourhood bought rolls of orange “organic” stickers and plastered them on all kinds of products. When I asked the owner about it he replied, with a cynical smile, they were not, after all, “inorganic” and if people want to pay for them, why shouldn’t he sell them? For these reasons (and to export “organic” wheat to Europe) the organic industry changed its mind about six years ago, and from demanding that there be no federal regulation, the industry insisted that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) step in with a national regulatory regime. The CFIA has finally done this. The new federal regulations come into effect at the end of next month. There will now be a comprehensive regime for products traded interprovincially and internationally using a new Canada logo based on third-party accreditation. This is a positive step that should cut down on some misrepresentation but not all. The federal regulations do not apply to products grown and sold within a single province and we will still have a multitude of symbols because the new federal logo is voluntary. And with no product testing, there will still be a lot of room for unscrupulous producers and retailers to get around the rules.

Organic. What does it mean? Not much. ■

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