

The Skinny on Organic Food

Organic foods generally cost more than their run-of-the-supermarket counterparts. Are they worth it?

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Marion Nestle, a New York University nutritionist and host of FoodPolitics.com, has written *What to Eat*, recently published by North Point Press. Nestle spoke with the *AARP Bulletin* about organic foods.

Q. What does (or should) it mean if something is labeled organic?

There's a federal definition. The USDA has developed organic standards that govern what [organic] producers can and cannot use. It took the USDA 12 years to develop the standards and they were revised in 2002. In general they are foods that are grown without pesticides and artificial fertilizers. There are rules about how animals must be kept and what they can be fed. There is an enormous list of substances that can and cannot be used.

Q. So somebody is enforcing the rules that apply to organic producers?

There are USDA-certified inspectors, absolutely. The USDA licenses inspectors in every state. There are groups that can certify, that are qualified to certify [state and private organizations] to do the inspections. They all have to be certified by the USDA.

Q. Have there been any recent attempts to change, or specifically, weaken the USDA's organic standards?

There have been endless attacks by the industry and the USDA to revise those standards since 2002. Mostly by the big organic food industry, the large organic producers. More and more corporate agriculture is going into organic products because people will pay a premium price for them. It's the only area of the food industry that's growing.

Q. What's an example of such an "attack?"

The most recent [example] was a rider attached to a spending bill in Congress that allowed substances that had been turned down by the Organics Standards Board (a USDA-appointed committee) to be used by producers and still have it called organic. Now whether those substances are good, bad or indifferent is really irrelevant, because the issue is whether people perceive the system as being honest. If the system isn't honest the whole thing falls apart. The bill passed [last year] despite hundreds of thousands of people writing in to complain. The Organic Trade Association at the last minute sold out the industry in a way and said it would be OK to pass the bill. If this type of thing

continues and these standards are weakened, people will not trust that if it says organic that it means anything.

Q. You've mentioned people will pay a premium for organics. What's making them spend the extra money? What are the positive benefits?

It's better for the planet and that's the most important thing. And there's no question that organic foods use less pesticides and that people who eat organic have lower levels of pesticides in their bodies.

Q. Are you getting better nutrition from organically grown foods?

That's harder to say. You're certainly getting more minerals because the soil is richer. Whether you're getting more vitamins? The differences are small. I don't think it's a big nutrition issue, I think it's an environmental issue. It's a small nutritional issue.

Q. So what are the advantages of buying organic foods if you're on a fixed income?

Well, for instance, if something is locally grown...it's fresher, it'll taste better. It's a choice you make. And if you can afford it, absolutely, you should buy it. Now if it's a fruit [for instance] that's imported from Chile or New Zealand...take organic apples from New Zealand...that seems crazy to me. They've traveled 12,000 miles.

Q. So then is local produce necessarily organic? Produce from farmers' markets?

No, only if it says so. If it's certified organic, you have an assurance that it meets the Department of Agriculture's regulations and that it has been inspected to prove that it does. If it says it's organic then it is. I believe you can trust that. Sometimes there are local producers who are "near organic" and who say they don't use many pesticides and don't use artificial fertilizers or whatever. And there you have to take it on trust, because they're not inspected.

Q. For people over 50, is there any particular value in buying organic?

Organic foods are worth supporting, for everyone. If people over 50 feel like they don't have a stake in that, then that's their choice. But I feel like organic food is healthier all around. Whether it is worth it for the price, that's an individual decision, not one I could make for people. But I do think that [organic] prices reflect the true cost of producing the food. Conventional agriculture is supported by the government in ways that artificially lower prices....and we have the cheapest food supply in the world.