



Going organic: Is it worth it?

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The Daily Telegraph

October 30, 2004

LONDON, England - Looking back, it was the porcini that finally tipped me over the edge. While out shopping for a midweek supper treat, I was reaching for the organic porcini mushrooms when my inner voice of reason cut in.

Hang on a minute: Porcini are uncultivated and gathered from the wild. How on earth can one pack be more organic than the other? And how come the "organic" version is a whopping (ps)37 per kilo more expensive?

Before I come across as a middle-class miser, I must state that, by instinct, I am an organic consumer. I hail from Irish farming stock, where Sunday lunch came from running about the yard pecking scraps on Saturday afternoon. While we were far from well off, wholesome food was a priority, and I truly believed my mother's lofty remarks that "tins are for poor people."

But times have changed -- and how. Food nowadays appears fraught with danger and buying organic products is often seen as a panacea for all ills.

Britain's Soil Association -- which proclaims itself "the U.K.'s leading campaigning and certification organization for organic food and farming" -- maintains that organic food contains higher levels of vitamin C and essential minerals. Because nitrate fertilizers aren't used, nitrate levels are lower, and while 350 chemicals are used in conventional British farming, only four are permitted in organic farming.

Given that both additives and pesticide residues have been linked to allergic reactions, asthma and hyperactivity in children, it's little wonder that parents, in particular, find themselves drawn to the organic shelves.

Where I live, in north London, organic food has become the ultimate (and, naturally, class-ridden) symbol of home, hearth and family values. Hand your child a box of non-organic raisins in the playground and you will elicit gasps of horror.

According to statistics from the Soil Association, three out of four British babies are fed organic food on a regular basis and about 40% of the baby food market is organic. When my two-year-old daughter was being weaned, I conscientiously bought jars and cartons of organic food, because it was better.

Of course it was. Wasn't it?

One day, I looked at a nutritional information panel, and the scales fell from my eyes.

The organic cream cheese I had so scrupulously searched out, week after week, contained six grams of fat per 100 grams, compared with 2.8 grams in the conventional version. As with the ordinary product, the organic version also contained more than 10 grams of sugar.

Once my initial outrage subsided, I was forced to concede that a fair amount of the blame lay not with the organic manufacturer -- it openly disclosed the ingredients -- but with me, and my naive assumption that anything "organic" is better for you.

"Hundreds of organic products are coming on to the market, including highly processed jelly

sweets, sugar-laden organic cereals, organic chicken burgers and even organic cigarettes," warned Food Magazine four years ago. "The opportunity for 'organic' to be associated with 'local' and 'fresh' is rapidly being eroded."

I am aware that I may sound terribly negative about organic food; I don't mean to. I simply feel passionately that shoppers are in danger of allowing themselves to be duped, by default.

By accepting the organic "brand" as superior, as a symbol of goodness and purity, we are less likely to look at the label and make informed decisions; about ingredients, about fat and sugar content, about cost.

At a gut level, I do feel that organic food is probably healthier. But is it worth the price? A study by Morgan Stanley earlier this year showed that organic food can cost up to 63% more than conventional.

"It's rather unfortunate that there's a perception that organic food is better," says Julian Morris, director of the International Policy Network, a think-tank on development issues.

"Some organic produce may have slightly higher nutrient levels, but there's a risk that people will buy less fruit and vegetables, making sure they're organic, rather than larger quantities of conventionally grown stuff."

I can vouch for that; a kilo of organic grapes would wipe out half my weekly fruit budget.

According to marketing experts, I represent a crucial demographic and my consumer behaviour is crucial to the continued success of the organic industry. As a mother, I bought into the concept of organic baby food; the question is whether I remain convinced that organic is best.

As I ponder my porcini purchase, the candid answer is that I'm just not sure.

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