



Eat Smart

June 2010

Finding healthy foods is getting easier.

By Brenda Lange

Health-conscious consumers want to know—Where does my food come from? How is it produced? What's in it and on it?

Several recent news reports put consumers on high alert: The foods we eat may be hazardous to our health. A study published in May's *Journal of Pediatrics* reports that researchers at the University of Montreal and Harvard University found that children with high levels of certain pesticides in their systems are at greater risk for ADHD.

Among the top ten recommendations for ways to reduce our risk of cancer, recently made by the President's Cancer Panel, include choosing pesticide-free and chemical fertilizer-free produce; drinking filtered tap water; and eating free-range meat that has not been exposed to antibiotics or growth hormone.

Reading labels, shopping carefully and looking for foods that are organically produced has been on the upswing for the last several decades. The green and locavore (those who eat food grown locally) movements have taken hold, encouraging more shoppers to purchase organically produced foods, in season from local providers, thereby helping our bodies and lowering our consumption of fossil fuels at the same time.

National guidelines are established and enforced by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for anything labeled as certified organic, but it wasn't always that way.

Phil Margolis, the founder and CEO of Neshaminy Valley Organic and Natural Foods Distributor in Ivyland, was an early proponent of organic eating and helped formulate this national certification process. He started his business in 1977, when

any regulating was done by different organizations, with ranges of acceptable guidelines. He says that although only 5 percent of all agriculture is organic, the organics business has grown in the last ten years to around \$29 billion dollars.

And while that growth is encouraging, it takes time for real change to happen. Besides changing consumer purchasing habits, farmers have to wait three years to use conventionally farmed land for organic growing. The secret lies in supply and demand.

“Large corporations are recognizing that consumers get to choose what they want to eat, and they’re increasingly choosing organic, so most major food companies have gotten into this arena.

“Historically it’s been mothers who have driven the market, switching to organic foods for the health of their children,” Margolis says. “In the last five to ten years, we’ve seen such a growth in demand for organics. Supermarkets have picked up on the demand. And this demand for foods created without chemical presences will continue to grow.”

At the same time that it’s become easier in one respect to eat more healthfully, it’s also become more complicated. Shopping often becomes a balancing act between organic foods, those grown locally and those whose price isn’t prohibitive.

“I’d love to go full-on organic, but price is definitely an issue,” says Karin Alexanderson of Fountainville, a vegetarian who grows some of her own food, and has been a careful shopper for years. “Also there’s balancing local versus long-distance food. If I can get non-organic milk from a farm up that road, that’s kind of worth it to save the shipping costs—dollars, plus environmental.”

Michael Pollan, author of “In Defense of Food” writes, “It’s confusing when these different values are in conflict and a real dilemma when they’re equally defensible.”

So the responsible food shopper needs to make some choices.

What’s in a label?

Any foods labeled “organic” must adhere to the USDA’s stringent standards.

“If a product has the USDA organic seal on it, it’s certified organic,” explains Jackie Ricotta, PhD, associate professor of horticulture at Delaware Valley College in Doylestown. “And that means it’s been grown without the use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, and has not been genetically modified. It also means it hasn’t been irradiated. Farms providing such foods must pass regular inspections and follow strict production methods.”

Foods with multiple ingredients, such as bread or cereal, can stipulate whether they are 100 percent or 95 percent organic, or made with organic ingredients, meaning

that at least 70 percent of its ingredients are organic. Only the first two get the certified seal of approval.

According to the USDA's website, organic food is not necessarily more nutritious. Eating these foods may also require more frequent trips to the market because, lacking any form of preservatives, they tend to spoil more quickly.

The "natural" designation assumes that foods were grown or raised without chemicals and without added antibiotics or hormones, or additives such as coloring or flavoring. But the term has no legal regulations to live up to, either from the USDA or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and is more of a marketing term, according to Ricotta.

Cost considerations

Choosing certified organic foods often means you will shell out more at the checkout. Organic farming methods cost the farmer more and the crop yield is often less. For certain fruits and vegetables that require extra help to ward off insects and molds, the extra expense is justified. These include peaches, strawberries, nectarines, spinach, bell peppers and lettuce, among others. See www.foodnews.org for clarification on the produce often referred to as the "dirty dozen."

For foods with thick peels that you don't eat, it's probably okay to spend a little less and buy conventionally grown; those with skins you plan to eat probably deserve the extra expense.

Herb Gersenson started Door-to-Door Organics in Bucks County in the mid 1990s, delivering fresh, organic fruits and vegetables from the field to your door (www.doortodoororganics.com). He believes consumers will begin to see a drop in prices for organic produce as more floods the market.

"If people go to the store and organic and conventional (produce) is the same price, which one will they buy? I think within 20 years, there will be no such thing as 'conventional' produce. Organic will then be conventional," he says with a laugh.

Staying local

Alexanderson is not alone in trying to shop for local foods whenever possible. Even larger markets, like Whole Foods, which carries all-natural items and high-quality organic produce, packaged goods, baked goods and meats, has recognized the value of promoting local producers. According to Danielle Smith, marketing specialist in the North Wales store, local foods all contain signage to that effect.

"We label these items with the distance they've traveled to get to the store, so shoppers can make their decision based on that if they want to," she says. But the word "local" is relative, and Whole Foods defines it as within a day's drive of the store.

“On average, food travels about 1,500 miles,” says Ricotta. “Choosing local also keeps these farms in business, preventing (the building of) more strip malls and subdivisions. One of the things I find most frustrating is that, even in the fall, most apples found around here are from Washington state, yet Pennsylvania and New York produce wonderful apples.”

Shopping seasonally—for local foods in season—makes sense too. The peach or blueberry or strawberry that is most delicious and nutritious is not picked before fully ripened and flown thousands of miles to your local market from growers outside the United States, where production standards are not as clear-cut. The juiciest are grown nearby and picked the same day you buy them.

Shady Brook Farm, a fourth generation farm located in Yardley, PA offers farm-grown and locally grown produce, gourmet food items, cheeses, homemade ice cream and a full stocked nursery department and greenhouse at The Market at Delaware Valley College (www.themarketatdelval.com). Their produce managers work with local growers and suppliers to ensure their fruits and veggies are at the peak of freshness every single day. When in season, they also carry locally-grown produce and produce grown right at DVC—picked and delivered to their market daily, when it is perfectly ripe and ready to be eaten. Locally grown at DVC means fruits and veggies are grown 500 feet away, picked daily at the peak of freshness and delivered straight to their shelves. They also sell produce grown at Shady Brook Farm, which is less than 20 miles away and also picked and delivered daily. The Market at DVC offers acres of fruits and veggies and invites you to enjoy their harvests hands-on with pick-your-own crops like strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, peaches, apples, and pumpkins.

Local Doylestown farm market, Maximuck’s offers fresh produce utilizing solar power and hydroponics, a method of growing vegetables such as lettuce using mineral nutrient solutions, in water, without soil. Maximuck’s also specializes in other locally-grown treasures, including pasta sauces and chicken pot pie.

Buckingham Township’s None Such Farm Market (www.nonesuchfarms.com) sells a wide variety of fresh produce straight from their farm and neighboring farms, including Blue Moon Acres Farm (www.bluemoonacres.net). Sweet corn is the main crop raised on None Such Farm, with 35 acres in production per year between white and bi-color.

Supporting local producers and promoting healthful eating are the prime concerns of the Doylestown Food Co-op, started last year by a handful of residents who love farmers’ markets and fresh foods, and want to spread the word.

“There is no local, central hub for farmers,” explains Mauro Reis, a member of the Co-op board and steering committee working toward building such a physical location. “Now there are great little farm markets, but they’re on different days of

the week and all over the place. This would be like a grocery store, where farmers can deliver their products, and they can be sold.”

The envisioned end store would be owned and operated by members of the community, who would have input on how it is run. Not limited to produce, the store would offer a range of goods from meats, poultry and dairy products to vegetables and dry goods.

“We look at about 100 miles out from the center (Doylestown),” says Reis, “and buy as close as possible to that center.”

This concept is similar to CSAs, Community Supported Agriculture, which continue to grow in popularity. Members buy shares in a farm’s annual yield, and pick up a weekly supply of whatever is fresh throughout the growing season.

Even Whole Foods has added a weekly outdoor market every Sunday featuring local producers. “This helps the local economy, educates consumers about the importance of buying local, and allows Whole Foods to see what has the highest demand and bring that into the market,” she adds.

If you like to eat meat

Most beef cattle in the United States are raised on a diet of corn—about 75 percent of the 100 million acres of corn grown in this country is fed to animals.

“Cows were not meant to eat corn. It causes them to gain weight rapidly, requiring antibiotics,” says Del Val’s Ricotta. “Meat from animals fed an organic diet or grass-fed are not treated with antibiotics or growth hormones, giving the meat a better consistency and lower fat content.”

Jeff Mease, co-owner of Meadow Brook Farms outside Springtown (www.meadowbrookfarmsbeef.com) agrees that the best beef comes from cattle such as his Black Angus, which are free-range, vegetarian fed and grass-finished. “We also use rotational grazing, or moving cattle from pasture to pasture, a system that’s sustainable for the animals as well as the grassland.”

As with anything that impacts the health of you and your family, the health of the planet and the health of your wallet—do your research. Read up, talk to others, get information and then go out and eat well. Bon appétit!

SIDEBAR:

Buying Tips

- Buy in season; shop on the day new produce is delivered.
- Read labels carefully. Look for added sugar, salt and fat, even in products labeled organic.

- Wash all fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly with running water; perhaps using a scrub brush for produce in which you eat the outer skin.
- Peel produce for additional protection, although that may reduce the amount of nutrients and fiber. Remove fat from meat and skin from poultry and fish, because pesticide residue may collect in fat.

Tips courtesy of Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com).

BOTTOM SIDEBAR:

Sources for More Information:

Penn State Extension Service provides information to consumers, by county, on gardening, nutrition, and more at <http://extension.psu.edu/counties>.

Input your zip code at www.localharvest.org to find locations for farm markets, CSAs, and restaurants near you.

The Bucks County Foodshed Alliance educates and promotes locally grown food for local consumption. See www.buckscountyfoodshedalliance.org.

Learn more about sources for natural poultry, beef, pork and other animals at www.eatwild.com.

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