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## Eating Food That's Better for You, Organic or Not

By [MARK BITTMAN](#)

In the six-and-one-half years since the federal government began certifying food as "organic," Americans have taken to the idea with considerable enthusiasm. Sales have at least doubled, and three-quarters of the nation's grocery stores now carry at least some [organic food](#). A Harris poll in October 2007 found that about 30 percent of Americans buy organic food at least on occasion, and most think it is safer, better for the environment and healthier.

"People believe it must be better for you if it's organic," says Phil Howard, an assistant professor of community, food and agriculture at [Michigan State University](#).

So I discovered on a recent book tour around the United States and Canada.

No matter how carefully I avoided using the word "organic" when I spoke to groups of food enthusiasts about how to eat better, someone in the audience would inevitably ask, "What if I can't afford to buy organic food?" It seems to have become the magic cure-all, synonymous with eating well, healthfully, sanely, even ethically.

But eating "organic" offers no guarantee of any of that. And the truth is that most Americans eat so badly — we get 7 percent of our [calories](#) from soft drinks, more than we do from vegetables; the top food group by caloric intake is "sweets"; and one-third of nation's adults are now obese — that the organic question is a secondary one. It's not unimportant, but it's not the primary issue in the way Americans eat.

To eat well, says [Michael Pollan](#), the author of "[In Defense of Food](#)," means avoiding "edible food-like substances" and sticking to real ingredients, increasingly from the plant kingdom. (Americans each consume an average of nearly two pounds a day of animal products.) There's plenty of evidence that both a person's health — as well as the environment's — will improve with a simple shift in eating habits away from animal products and highly processed foods to plant products and what might be called "real food." (With all due respect to people in the "food movement," the food need not be "slow," either.)

From these changes, Americans would reduce the amount of land, water and chemicals used to produce the food we eat, as well as the incidence of lifestyle diseases linked to unhealthy diets, and greenhouse gases from industrial meat production. All without legislation.

And the food would not necessarily have to be organic, which, under the [United States Department of Agriculture](#)'s definition, means it is generally free of synthetic substances; contains no [antibiotics](#) and hormones; has not been [irradiated](#) or fertilized with sewage sludge; was raised without the use of most

conventional [pesticides](#); and contains no genetically modified ingredients.

Those requirements, which must be met in order for food to be labeled “U.S.D.A. Organic,” are fine, of course. But they still fall short of the lofty dreams of early organic farmers and consumers who gave the word “organic” its allure — of returning natural nutrients and substance to the soil in the same proportion used by the growing process (there is no requirement that this be done); of raising animals humanely in accordance with nature (animals must be given access to the outdoors, but for how long and under what conditions is not spelled out); and of producing the most nutritious food possible (the evidence is mixed on whether organic food is more nutritious) in the most ecologically conscious way.

The government’s organic program, says Joan Shaffer, a spokeswoman for the Agriculture Department, “is a marketing program that sets standards for what can be certified as organic. Neither the enabling legislation nor the regulations address [food safety](#) or [nutrition](#).”

People don’t understand that, nor do they realize “organic” doesn’t mean “local.” “It doesn’t matter if it’s from the farm down the road or from Chile,” Ms. Shaffer said. “As long as it meets the standards it’s organic.”

Hence, the organic status of salmon flown in from Chile, or of frozen vegetables grown in China and sold in the United States — no matter the size of the carbon footprint left behind by getting from there to here.

Today, most farmers who practice truly sustainable farming, or what you might call “organic in spirit,” operate on small scale, some so small they can’t afford the requirements to be certified organic by the government. Others say that certification isn’t meaningful enough to bother. These farmers argue that, “When you buy organic you don’t just buy a product, you buy a way of life that is committed to not exploiting the planet,” says Ed Maltby, executive director of the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance.

But the organic food business is now big business, and getting bigger. Professor Howard estimates that major corporations now are responsible for at least 25 percent of all organic manufacturing and marketing (40 percent if you count only processed organic foods). Much of the nation’s organic food is as much a part of industrial food production as midwinter grapes, and becoming more so. In 2006, sales of organic foods and beverages totaled about \$16.7 billion, according to the most recent figures from Organic Trade Association.

Still, those sales amounted to slightly less than 3 percent of overall food and beverage sales. For all the hoo-ha, organic food is not making much of an impact on the way Americans eat, though, as Mark Kastel, co-founder of The Cornucopia Institute, puts it: “There are generic benefits from doing organics. It protects the land from the ravages of conventional agriculture,” and safeguards farm workers from being exposed to pesticides.

But the questions remain over how we eat in general. It may feel better to eat an organic Oreo than a conventional Oreo, but, says Marion Nestle, a professor at [New York University](#)’s department of nutrition, food studies and public health, “Organic junk food is still junk food.”

Last week, [Michelle Obama](#) began digging up a patch of the South Lawn of the White House to plant an organic vegetable garden to provide food for the first family and, more important, to educate children about healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables at a time when [obesity](#) and [diabetes](#) have become national concerns.

But Mrs. Obama also emphasized that there were many changes Americans can make if they don't have the time or space for an organic garden.

"You can begin in your own cupboard," she said, "by eliminating processed food, trying to cook a meal a little more often, trying to incorporate more fruits and vegetables."

Popularizing such choices may not be as marketable as creating a logo that says "organic." But when Americans have had their fill of "value-added" and overprocessed food, perhaps they can begin producing and consuming more food that treats animals and the land as if they mattered. Some of that food will be organic, and hooray for that. Meanwhile, they should remember that the word itself is not synonymous with "safe," "healthy," "fair" or even necessarily "good."

*Mark Bittman writes the Minimalist column for the Dining section of The Times and is the author, most recently, of "Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating."*

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