

Food for thought as organic sales grow

More expensive but experts split on whether it is any better for you

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Sales of organic food are now worth more than £1.12bn to UK retailers and the market is growing at twice the rate of the general grocery market. Figures from the Soil Association show that organic food sales increased by more than 10% last year although the amount of food sold through supermarkets fell by 1%. This shows that customers increasingly prefer to buy their produce from a more direct source. Sales in this sector have risen by 16% to £108m. However, organic food is more expensive. The lack of herbicides means that farmers have to weed some crops by hand. Production costs are higher and there are no subsidies available.

The scientific community is divided between those who are concerned about the cocktail effect of pesticide residues and can point to research saying that organic food has more nutrients than conventionally farmed produce and those who say there is no significant difference. The Food Standards Authority has acknowledged that some food does contain pesticide residues but says it is within safe limits. The Soil Association says we don't know the long-term effects. Below is a look inside a typical shopping trolley.

Chicken - organic whole chicken £9.98* Tesco Large whole chicken £4.28

Around 4.5m organic chickens were sold last year, according to the Soil Association's Organic Food and Farming Report 2004. Almost no organic chicken is imported, and it is likely that organic poultry will continue to be the fastest growing area of organic livestock in 2004-2005.

For: In the UK chickens are mainly factory farmed, indoors in crowded cages, and given daily antibiotics to ward off disease. Pigs are also intensively reared and unable to indulge in natural foraging habits. Organic chickens and pigs are allowed to roam outside. Free range means birds have outside access for at least half their lives. It doesn't mean they will choose to go outside. Traditional free range means more extensive open-air access and smaller flocks. To be certified as a SA organic chicken, the bird must be in a flock of less than 2,000 birds, although 500 is recommended. Free range birds can be in flocks of up to 12,000 and non-organic hens may number 40,000. Anything that has SA certification will have a sticker marked UK5.

Against: Many people feel that the main issue is one of traceability rather than organic status. Natalie Savona, author of *The Kitchen Shrink*, says you can buy meat from farmers' markets where the farmer will be able to tell you how it was reared and how far it has travelled. If you can't get to a market, then ask your local butcher where he sources his produce.

Beef and Lamb - organic beef joint £8.69 per kilo. Beef joint £5.15 per kilo

For: While all sheep and cattle in the UK tend to live outside and have the freedom to roam around, non-organic lambs are still given doses of pesticides and antibiotics to prevent disease. Studies have also found that organic lamb and beef has higher levels of 3 fatty acids and vitamin E thought due to their grass-rich diet.

Against: British farmers don't use growth hormones, unlike their American counterparts, and they are not intensively reared. It is probably better to buy non-organic from the UK rather than something organic from round the world.

Milk - organic semi-skimmed milk 55p a litre. Semi-skimmed milk 49p a litre

Demand for organic dairy products is still growing, whereas the non-organic market is static. The Organic Milk Suppliers Co-operative indicates that six million more Britons would drink organic milk if it were more widely available.

For: Organic milk has up to 71% more Omega 3 or essential fatty acids according to a recent study by the University of Aberdeen. Omega 3 helps maintain a healthy heart, supple joints and strong bones. It is also good for brain function. The best source of Omega 3 is oily fish but by swapping to organic milk and dairy products, you can increase your intake.

Against: The FSA says that safety limits are set for all approved pesticides. They are based on scientific evidence and have large margins of error built in. A spokesman said that avoiding certain foods because of the fear of pesticide residues would be more dangerous to health than choosing non-organic varieties.

Eggs - Organic medium eggs (six) £1.14. Free range medium eggs (six) 84p

Large scale suppliers of organic eggs report that there has been limited growth and that sales of organic eggs are rising faster than those of non-organic. The new online shopping service www.ocado.com, run in partnership with Waitrose, reports that one third of all egg sales are organic.

For: Organic eggs are higher in essential fatty acids. They come from farms with higher animal welfare standards and there are no antibiotic residues. A Spanish study also found that when chickens were fed a diet that included grass, the vitamin E content of their eggs increased significantly.

Against: At the moment few of the 30m organic eggs sold in Britain are purely organic. A chick can be classified as producing organic eggs after six weeks of an organic diet. Until August when the rules will change, this diet may include 20% non-organic matter. By next January, producers will have to give their pullets an organic diet from birth and follow organic veterinary rules, which ban the use of antibiotic growth promoters.

Apples - organic apples £1.99 a bag. Braeburn apples class 1 £1.28 a bag

For: Studies have found that they absorb a lot of pesticides. Even when you peel them, and this goes for oranges and melons too, the fruit will have absorbed the chemicals. Some apples are sprayed up to 16 times with 36 different chemicals. In recent years, UK government research has found pesticide residues in one third of food including apples, bread, cereal bars, lettuce and potatoes.

Against: If the only way to get our five portions of fruit and veg a day is by not eating organic then don't bother. "Don't stop eating fruit and veg altogether," says Ms Savona. "It is far more important to eat the right nutrients than be too obsessed with whether it is organic or not."

Carrots - organic carrots £1.02 a kilo. Carrots 54p a kilo

For: Non-organic varieties are sprayed with chemicals to the roots. A Danish study found that rats who were fed an organic diet of potatoes, carrots, peas and apples were healthier than those on a conventional or minimally fertilised diet.

Against: Health benefits come when the food is grown locally, picked when ripe and then sold. If its in season, buy British rather than searching for an organic crop that has flown round the world.

Bread - organic thick sliced wholemeal bread 53p a loaf; premium wholemeal thick sliced bread 52p a loaf

For: Organic bread means the crops have not been sprayed with pesticides. Organophosphates, related to nerve gas, are used on wheat. These have been linked with cancer, decreasing male fertility and Parkinson's disease. Pesticide residues are ranked among the top three environmental cancer risks by the US government.

Against : No need to buy organic white bread. To make it white, the outer husks where the pesticides collect are removed.

• All prices from Tesco

Germany leads the way

The global market for organic food is worth £15bn. The European market for organic food is £7.2bn. Germany remains the EU's leading market with an estimated retail value of £2.1bn.

Direct sales of organic food topped £100m in 2003/04. Sales through box schemes, farmers' markets and farm shops have grown faster than any other retail outlet at 16% from £93.3m to £108m.

Organic food and drink now accounts for 1.2% of the total retail market.

Although imports of organic food have steadily reduced over the last few years, the Soil Association found that imports have remained static at 56% in 2003-04. A fifth of the organic meat sold in the UK is imported while potatoes, carrots, onions, apples and pears are still being imported by some leading retailers even when in season here. This is despite a target set by the government to encourage retailers to ensure that imports fall to 30% by 2010.

The number of registered organic farmers was 3,995 in April 2004, according to the Organic Food and Farming Report, 2004.

About 55% of the UK's organically managed land is in Scotland, with 373,249 hectares across 683 farms. This accounts for almost 7% of Scotland's agricultural land. The rest of the UK has an average of 4% organic farmland, according to the Soil Association.

Charles Leigh

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