

the earth's best

Going organic is the new buzzword in health and nutrition. **JUSTINA TAN** gets to the bottom of what that means, exactly.

YOU'VE HEARD AND read all about the worldwide organic movement, and even your neighbourhood shops and supermarkets are getting in on the action. Some claim that eating organic is better for your health, while others say the production of organic products is more eco-friendly and responsible.

But do you know what the term "organic" really means? Read on to find out.



organic demystified

Plant products sold with an organic label are grown on certified organic land without pesticides, synthetic fertilisers, sewage sludge, genetically modified organisms, or ionising radiation.

Organic farming also subscribes to protecting the long-term fertility of soil through traditional practices like crop rotation and natural fertilisers, while non-organic farming permits the use of a wide range of chemicals to keep pests away and increase yield, possibly resulting in chemical residues and pesticides in the produce or end product. While organic foods may not be completely chemical-free, the chemical traces found are considerably lower than in foods produced with synthetic chemicals.

For animal products like meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products, an organic label means the animals have access to the outdoors, and eat only organic feed (without any antibiotics or growth hormones) for at least six months to a year.

A common misconception is that organic equates to natural – it doesn't. Natural foods do not contain additives or preservatives, but may contain ingredients that have been grown with pesticides or are genetically modified. Moreover, natural foods are not regulated and do not meet the same criteria as organic foods.

DID YOU KNOW?

No organic certification exists for seafood, as even seafood harvested from the wild can contain contaminants, such as mercury.

“Not all organic products are made equal. There are different categories for how organic a product is.”

stamp of approval

Not all organic products are made equal. There are different categories for how organic a product is; some are certified by international certification bodies, while others aren't.

Some local produce and products claim to be organic but there's no way to verify it as there is no certification body in Singapore – you have to make your purchasing decision based on how credible the merchant or manufacturer seems.

However, imported organic products usually come with a label or seal by the various organic certification bodies throughout the world, most of them from the US, UK and Europe, with a handful in Asia, like in Japan and Taiwan. The more established certification bodies are the United States

Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Soil Association in the UK, and Australian Certified Organic.

For a quick understanding of how organic products are labelled, here's an example from USDA's National Organic Programme:

- **100% ORGANIC** Made with 100 per cent organic ingredients
- **ORGANIC** Made with at least 95 per cent organic ingredients
- **MADE WITH ORGANIC INGREDIENTS** Made with a minimum of 70 per cent organic ingredients with strict restrictions on the remaining 30 per cent, including genetically modified organisms (GMOs).
- **PRODUCTS WITH LESS THAN 70 PER CENT ORGANIC INGREDIENTS** may list organically produced ingredients on the side panel of the package, but may not make any organic claims at the front of the package.

striking a balance

Hopefully, with the rise in demand for organic produce, costs will drop. Here's how you can go organic without blowing your budget.

1 DO YOUR RESEARCH Pay attention to your family's diet and buy organic for foods they enjoy or consume often. Investigate local organic produce and stores to find out where you can get your organic fix for less.

2 BE OPEN Not all organic foods taste or look the same as their non-organic counterparts. Some organic produce may be more or less tasty than their non-organic counterparts, so be open and try out which versions you prefer.

3 GROW YOUR OWN Even if the produce from your backyard isn't certified organic, there's nothing like eating fresh from your own garden. Moreover, you can control the use of pesticides and fertilisers.

4 TWEAK YOUR SHOPPING LIST Use the money you would otherwise spend on junk food to buy more organic foods. After all, it is difficult to put a price tag on one's health and the environment.

good for you, or not?

According to a \$36 million four-year UK study, organic fruits and vegetables were found to contain as much as 40 per cent more antioxidants, which scientists believe can cut the risk of cancer and heart disease.

The same study showed that the level of antioxidants in milk from organic herds were up to 90 per cent higher than ordinary milk; University of California researchers also found that organic tomatoes had more phytochemicals and vitamin C than regular ones.

While the Health Promotion Board maintains that there is no consistent body of evidence to indicate that organic food is nutritionally superior, Singapore Heart Foundation nutritionist Jamie Liow says that, logically speaking, since organic farming is free from pesticides and antibiotics, organic produce should give you higher quality nutrients.



TIP

THE MANUFACTURE OF SOME PROCESSED FOODS, SUCH AS BREADS, CHIPS, PASTA, AND OILS, DESTROYS MANY NUTRIENTS, SO DON'T BOTHER WITH ORGANIC VERSIONS.

tripping into the organic pit

A 2005 survey by The Nielsen Company found that more than 60 per cent of Singaporeans claim to consume organic food. According to Britain's Organic Monitor, the estimated retail sales for our organic market stood at \$58 million in 2006.

But at what price? Organic produce can command premium prices ranging from 100 to 300 per cent of non-organic equivalents. For example, Malaysian non-organic tomatoes cost about 60 cents per kg, whereas organic vine tomatoes from Holland cost about \$13.50 per kg – at least 22 times more.

Moreover, not all produce and products claiming to be organic are actually organic, especially if they haven't been certified, although it doesn't mean organic produce and products that aren't certified are inferior – the certification process is lengthy and expensive, especially



organic essentials

Some produce retain more pesticides while others almost don't absorb any. This list from the Environmental Working Group in the US helps you decide when to buy organic.

DIRTY DOZEN

Peaches
Apples
Sweet bell peppers
Celery
Nectarines
Strawberries
Cherries
Lettuce
Grapes
Peas
Spinach
Potatoes

CLEANEST 12

Onions
Avocado
Frozen sweet corn
Pineapples
Mango
Frozen sweet peas
Asparagus
Kiwi
Bananas
Cabbage
Broccoli
Eggplant

for small farmers.

Then there's the environmental issue – the farming of organic food may not use synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, but it may be no better for the environment. In some cases, they may contribute more to global warming than intensive agriculture, according to a UK government report. There is also flak over the carbon dioxide emissions from the freighting of

organic produce and products from their point of origin to countries like Singapore, suggesting a larger carbon footprint.

Still, Jamie says that if you can afford the high costs, it is worthwhile to go organic for its health benefits. If you find it too expensive, she recommends washing or scrubbing fruits and vegetables thoroughly to remove traces of pesticides before consumption. 54