The De-Glorified Organic: Why We Should Be Eating Local and Not Organic
Rachel Abramowitz
November 8, 2015

Rachel Abramowitz graduated magna cum laude in 2016 with a sociology major and a psychology minor. Along with being a member of the Junto Society, she is Phi Beta Kappa, sole recipient of the Kephart Award in Sociology, a Fulbright Grant Finalist, Alpha Kappa Delta (Sociology Honors), Historian of the Black Pyramid Senior Honor Society and has served as F&M Hillel’s president, secretary and hospitality chair. She has also served on the executive board of Order of Omega Upsilon Upsilon chapter (the Greek honor society at F&M) and Interfaith Student Council, and on the general board of Kappa Delta Sorority Eta Lambda Chapter and Ware College House. She was a recipient of the Ware Institute for Civic Engagement’s Public Service Summer Internship as well as worked on campus at the Auxiliary Services office for all four years at F&M. Inspired by her own study abroad experience in Copenhagen, Denmark, Rachel has accepted a full time position as the Philadelphia Region’s Campus Coordinator for the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE).
In today's America, saying that organics are “good” would be nearly equivalent to naming the sky as blue or the grass as green. There is an almost unquestioned belief that the organic food movement is positive in all its regards. This is evidenced in the Organic Trade Association’s 2015 Market Analysis, in which United States consumer sales of organic products exceeded $39 billion dollars and now represent almost 5 per cent of total U.S. food sales. Further, 51 per cent of families are buying more organic products than a year ago with 83 per cent of parents buying some organic products. And there are no signs of these trends slowing down in the near future (Organic Trade Association, 2015).

In this paper, I will argue that with the current increase of industrial organics and the blind consumerism fueling this demand, Americans should be focusing less on buying organic and more on consuming local and seasonal foods. By looking at the common reasons people give for buying organic, I hope to prove that in the current U.S. market, the cost of organic produce outweighs the benefits. Buying local produce, on the other hand, addresses such concerns while also being economically beneficial. Because of this, I propose that buying local is a superior alternative for buying organic.

Consumer interviews readily attest to the fact that organic food is better than “conventional food” or the foodstuffs produced and grown without an organic certification. Michael, a consumer who reported his experience to “organics.org,” reported his motivation as follows: “We just wanted to continue to give her [our daughter] foods that haven’t been exposed to that unnatural and harmful stuff.” Yet, when we continue to read the transcript of the interview, a deeper matter is uncovered. “It just seems that fruits like strawberries and apples are most affected. Their skins are directly exposed to the pesticides, aren’t they?” The issue lies not in the information he presents but in the fact
that, like most Americans, he is not even sure of what it means for something to be organic, let alone if - and to what extent - they are harmful or not. Yet he is still willing to spend sometimes up to double the cost to provide this food to his daughter. Michael represents a vast number of Americans that are seduced by the socially constructed notion that organics are “good” without any substantive knowledge base behind their decision.

When a brand consultancy called BFG surveyed shoppers in September of 2014, researchers found that almost 70 per cent were buying some sort of organic food, yet less than 20 percent of these shoppers reported that they believed they could accurately define what the term “organic” meant (Brownstone, 2014). If these results are generalizable to the American consumer at large, such consumers exemplified by Michael above, define the notion of “blind consumerism.” For the purposes of this paper, I will define this phenomenon as making purchases based on unfounded and ambiguous knowledge. In other words, consumer decisions are being based on superficial, incomplete or all-together non-existent information.

Organic Agriculture is defined by the National Organic Standards Board as “an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. It is based on the minimal use of off-farm inputs and on management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony” (edia of Food and Culture, 2003). In l99, the United States Department of Agriculture implemented the Organic Foods Production Act, which further and more generally defined organic production as one that will “respond to site-specific conditions by integrating cultural, biological and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity.” This includes growing crops
without applying synthetic products such as inorganic fertilizers, growth hormones, GMOs or pesticides (Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, 2003). In layman’s terms, organic food has been grown or produced in an environmentally conscious way and without synthetic products.

Part of the characterization of “organics” comes from the strict regulation of the term and label “organic,” which denotes a specific and regulated process of production and certification. This minimum of three-year, nationally regulated process is rigorous and expensive for the farmer yet makes no claims as to the safety or nutrition of the product. It merely serves as an indicator of the production process. This label is highly policed; deliberate misrepresentation can result in severe consequences. This is not the case with many other labels such as “all-natural,” “local” or “fresh,” which often cause confusion and generalized distrust among consumers (Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, 2003).

The term “industrial organics” is a recently coined phrase used to describe the mass-produced organic foods grown on industrial farms. These are the types of “organics” one sees at American superstores such as Wal-Mart, Whole Foods, and Giant (Cooper & Adamick, 2006). Due to the difficulty and expense associated with an official “organic” certification, there has been an increase in these large-scale organic farming operations. These allow for the cost-cutting benefits of mass-production while also profiting from the retail price-increase and consumer appeal associated with a certified organic label. This type of production also allows for organics to be included in our modern globalized food system. Industrial organics allows producers and retailers to supply consumers with the wide variety of non-seasonal produce to which they have become accustomed.
One of the main reasons people report buying organics today is their supposed environmental benefit. (Wolchover, 2012). But when we look at the environmental cost of the jet fuel or truck emissions that come as a result of industrialized organics, it seems to undermine the biologically sustainable farming techniques. In fact, according to a study done by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, the globalized food system is liable for up to one-third of all human-caused greenhouse-gas emissions (Gilbert, 2012).

Buying local can be seen as a solution to this problem due to the decrease in harmful emissions from transportation and large-scale facilities; local foods are produced nearby and on a smaller scale. Although some locally grown farms may not be able to be certified “organic” due to the cost of a USDA certification, generalized organic practices are often still used in small-scale, local farming operations. In consuming local produce therefore, the deleterious effects of transporting modern organic products are avoided, while the benefits to the local economy are enhanced.

In addition, one finds additional research suggesting that the benefits of organics are not as plentiful as once presumed. One meta-analysis published in the Journal of Environmental Management (2012 suggests that organic farming generally has positive impacts on the environment per unit of area, yet that is not the case when one considers the per product unit (Tuomisto, Hodge, Riordan, Macdonald). The research team found that ammonia emissions, nitrogen leaching, and nitrous oxide emissions per product unit - as well as land use per product unit - were higher in areas that employed organic growing methods. This study does not completely waive the benefits of organics, but underscores that we often overestimate and idealize the purported ecological benefits of an “organic”
The De-Glorified Organic

Further, a study done at Stanford University (2012) found that some certified “organic” food samples examined contained traces of pesticides. So far from enhancing one’s health by eating ‘organic’ foods, the unwary consumer may actually be exposing himself to the same hazards as those who simply pick *any* fruit off the grocery stand.

Along those lines, another widely believed benefit of organics is their improved taste. In addition to enhanced flavor of organics, studies have shown that most consumers also believe that there are more nutrients in organic produce (Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, 2003). In one study published in the *Journal of Food Quality and Preference*, researchers found that in a taste test, participants estimated those foods with organic labels were lower in calories, although both food stuffs were exactly the same but adorned with different labels. Participants also responded that the organic labeled foods tasted lower in fat and higher in fiber, and offered other supposed nutritional benefits. These differences were less pronounced among people who typically buy organic foods (Lee et. al, 2013).

This taste argument can easily be refuted by multiple studies that have found high levels of suggestibility in taste perception. Taste is often socially constructed and varies across culture and time, so it is impossible to state categorically that one item “tastes better” than another. To support the notion of taste as socially constructed, advertising and marketing can lead consumers to expect and believe that organic foods taste better. Research conducted at the University of Missouri (Gruen, 28) demonstrated the inconsistent findings that organic milk “; there simply is no consensus in taste-tests regarding organic vs. non organic milk.
I contrast, seasonal and smaller scale farmed produce has been shown to be higher in natural sugars due to freshness due to picking at peak ripeness, with a corresponding lack of transportation and storage from farm to table (Wolchover, 2012). Consumers innately find that foods higher in these natural sugars are more desirable, a preference that evolved in order to preclude us from eating rancid or poisonous foods that often taste bitter. Local produce therefore tastes better to most consumers; mass-produced goods are in contrast bland and less desirable.

At the level of nutritional value, The Stanford Report analyzing produce, meats and dairy, found that organic foods are no more nutritious than conventional foods. In addition, a study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found no evidence that organic foods were in any way nutritionally superior. Since the label “organic” does not make claims about the nutritional composition or quality of the food and only about the production process, the Stanford study was able to conclude that in general, buying organic does not bring about any obvious or immediate health benefits (Chang, 2012). The study also argued persuasively that increases in nutritional content are often much more influenced by other variables such as ripeness, freshness, crop handling, and storage. These are exactly the benefits of local produce; consumers seeking these features in organic foods have thus succumbed to ‘blind consumerism,’ steering them away from what is available locally.

The local food solution takes the organic consumer’s moral drive for environmental and nutritional betterment and redirects these values into a system with tangible and concrete benefits. It fills the void of the de-glorified organic and takes its place as an improved alternative in today’s global food system.
Consumers often report feeling uncomfortable or disgusted when learning about where their food comes from in an industrialized food system. Many find it unappealing that apples in the aisles of the local supermarket are picked when green, flash frozen, and then gassed to red glistening perfection months after being picked. How many of us are comfortable being told that meat in a can can last for up to 5 years. The solution seems clear: buy food locally grown and brought fresh to market.

For the purposes of this argument, I will define local not as a distinct physical proximity from the location of production to the location of consumption, but rather in terms of the scale of operation. This means that the Strohman bread factory might be right down the road from my house yet not be considered local due to the mass-production and national distribution of their bread, while a small-scale farm a hundred miles away satisfy the criterion. What constitutes foodstuffs as local is a production process that does not require extensive shipping, storing, and handling prior to retail and consumption.

Buying local allows consumers the peace of mind in knowing where their food comes from and what is in it: a common theme often voiced in the motivation to buy organic. Despite the ability to know the farmer and the farm, some consumers worry that the ecological benefits will not accrue, since many small-scale farming operations do not have an organic certification. But this does not mean that non-organic farms necessarily use harmful chemicals. In fact, many local farms use a practice called Integrated Pest Management, or IPM, due to the cost effectiveness and accessibility. This practice leans away from using pesticides and other chemicals and instead applies knowledge about pests to maintain healthy crops (The IPM Institute of North America, Inc.). Local foods can thus
still hold the ecological and pesticide-reduced benefits of produce grown by organic methods while not compromising the consumers’ health concerns.

Surrounded by the rich farmland in Lancaster County, it is easy to forget that local food is a luxury that not all Americans can enjoy. Even so, both organic and locally grown foods are subject to geographic and demographic exclusions. Inner-city populations especially in underserved neighborhoods have little to no access to either organic or local foods due to economic and physical constraints. Seasonality and climate also restrict the availability of locally grown foods. Because of these factors, it is impractical to assume that this is a conversation that everyone can participate in.

Looking at the bigger economic picture, though, it becomes clear that buying local is better for both the consumer as well as the local and national economy. Stimulating the local economy in today’s market can improve the individual lives of farmers, retailers, and consumers through its aims to enhance competitiveness and encourage inclusive sustainable growth (The World Bank). Organics today do not have such economic benefits and instead are contributing to the monopolization of the food system, in which four companies control over half the world’s seed supply (Roseboro, 2013). Companies that hold monopolies, such as Whole Foods, can raise prices and exploit blind consumerism to make a profit, while shoppers reap no discernible benefits. With a switch to local foods, the profits will lie in the hands of the consumers and the producers, not large corporations. With the rise in community gardens and farmer’s markets, local food is becoming increasingly accessible to consumers of all demographics. Specifically, the increase in community gardens target the vastly underserved inner city population and provide them with local foods as well as learning and community building opportunities.
If individuals can make the shift to buying locally grown produce, they can escape the blind consumerism engendered by the organic food movement. Consumers today must begin to think critically and question the food they consume. One cannot assume that packaging, labeling, and socially constructed notions of organic goodness are based on anything but self-serving moral rhetoric, because in fact they often based in nothing else. Considered the epitome of moral choice in our globalized food system, the selection of organic foods does not in fact rest on real benefit or difference. For consumers who desire such benefits, it is clear that “buying local” can make up for the areas that organics are lacking. Small changes can make a huge difference in combatting widespread monopolization of food production by large corporations. Individual consumers must come together to make a change in a system that is limiting choice, production, and the environment. Buying locally won’t solve the problem, but it will take us one step in the right direction.

References


University of Missouri. 2008. University of Missouri Food Science Research: Columbia, M.O.