

## Consumer Preference - Does 'Organic' mean 'Quality'?

*What does quality mean? Is organic food automatically quality food? Lawrence Woodward and Angelika Meier-Ploeger discuss the concept of quality.*

There are many images that are used to conjure up the sense of quality: blue skies and white clouds, for example; motherhood; virginity; apple pie and cream; the corn as high 'as an elephants eye'. I could almost burst into song as I buy my car, dishwasher, chocolate bar, designer drink or even organic breakfast muesli.

Even as we fall for the sting we know that the term 'quality' has become an extremely potent marketing tool and can make the unacceptable marketable, give the commonplace a veneer of speciality and the average an aura of excellence.

This is especially so in the marketing of food because it is – to use the jargon – 'a mature market'. In other words, there is little scope for developing the market for basic foodstuffs. To keep expanding, processors and retailers have to come up with new products or new marketing slants on old products. Simple with cars, but not so easy, one might think, with carrots. One would be wrong.

Carrots, in Europe at least, have been recreated and marketed in numerous ways. They have been selected, graded, washed, put into plastic bags, picked young and bunched – both washed and unwashed. They have been chopped, sliced, frozen, canned, grated and juiced; they have been put into soups, pre-packed salads, ready to cook meals and, sometimes, they are sold simply as carrots.

This all with the aim of adding retail value and generally with the sales pitch of enhancing 'quality'. Some carrots, like a number of other foodstuffs, might now be approaching the zenith of being marketed with 'organic quality'. The phrase brings together two of the decades most favoured buzzwords without committing itself to any intelligible meaning. But, of course, because the phrase uses the word 'quality' and the word 'organic' the image that is conjured up is likely to be something 'good and desirable'.

This raises an interesting point. A long-standing concern of the organic movement has been to ensure that 'food quality' is accepted as meaning more than an assessment of the readily accessible characteristics of food. The concern was directed against the conventional market's obsession with cosmetic characteristics of food and against the simplistic view that organic food could be defined by the absence or otherwise of pesticide residues.

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As a direct consequence the question was raised as to whether it is legitimate to call something a 'quality food' simply on the basis that it looks or tastes good if its production caused damage to the environment. The question caused considerable effort to be made to promote the idea that any description of food quality should include an assessment of its production methods.

In 1989, a number of people who had been involved in various facets of considering food quality and organic production came together in a colloquium to discuss the concept of food quality and methodologies for evaluating it. Most of these people had long associations with organic food production, research and policy. There were also some participants from the conventional sector.

A consensus was reached which agreed that any assessment of food quality should rest on six criteria. These were:

- Authenticity (*due to the advent of genetic engineering*)
- Function
- Biological nature
- Nutritional status
- Sensual nature
- Ethical status (*which included environmental considerations*)



Since then the concept has evolved further to highlight the importance of relationships between farmers, processors and traders in the context of regional development.

Ten years later it seems that the fundamental framework is as robust and even more pertinent than ever, especially with the invidious encroachment of genetic engineering. The belief then, and now, is that if organic food makes any claim to 'quality' that implies excellence, it should be based on this conceptual framework. Indeed, if the phrase 'organic quality' is to mean anything honourable and to be more than a cynical marketing ploy then all foods, processes or systems claiming it must fully comply with that concept.

We, the authors of the concept, believe this and we are sure that a reasonable number of people within the international organic community also do. But do the consumers of organic foods? What do they perceive 'quality' to be? Who are the consumers anyway?

### **The Abstract Consumer**

Although we are all consumers, discussions like this tend to treat the consumer as an 'abstract'. Creating this distance allows us to refer to consumers in anyway we wish; as an amorphous mass; a discriminating jury; a sophisticated arbiter of taste; or even as a lump of wet clay to be moulded and shaped. The abstract consumer is subject to reverence, vilification and all degrees in between. Even worse, the abstract consumer is used by all interest groups, 'goodies and baddies' alike, in a tactic that is pure Machiavelli – to provide a worthy justification for our actions.

However, if we think for a moment of our own behaviour and aspirations as individual consumers, we can see that there can be significant contradictions. For example, we may want fresh food but we also want convenience; we may want healthy wholefoods but sometimes most of us welcome a touch of champagne and canapés; we may support our local economies but hold onto aspirations and tastes that make us global shoppers. If we recognise this and try to place ourselves within the consumer body, we instantly recognise that it is anything but an amorphous mass.

There are many differences, confusions and even conflicts that prevent us from giving a single and simple answer. There are, though, a number of indications and recurring themes that are notable and seem to appear in all countries where a market for organic food is developing.

It does seem that factors such as health and flavour are more important to more organic consumers than altruistic factors such as environment, animal welfare and social considerations. In addition, there is an indication that a significant number of organic consumers would welcome 'organic convenience food'. This despite the increase in processing, use of additives, packaging, centralisation and food miles involved in producing such foods. There is also the likelihood that most processing will destroy many of the quality characteristics that the organic farming system gave to the food.

### **Details of Organic Standards**

It is likely that these consumers know next to nothing about the detail of organic standards and are willing to trust that a product that is certified organic conforms to a basic 'no chemicals or additives' perception. It is almost certain that most consumers would not expect to find that over thirty additives or aids are allowed in organic food processing; or that they would not expect 20% of the diet of some organic animals to come from conventional sources.

After years of involvement with standards, we know there are reasons for all of these allowances. We even believe that some of them are good. But we cannot believe that the consumer expects to find them in the organic system.

There is also a danger that allowances are too easily made and too readily given. That danger is increasing the whole time. We might suddenly find we have a complete 'certified organic' food system that organic consumers do not expect and instinctively do not trust. This raises the question of where is the organic industry heading? And what relationship should it have with the organic movement?

There is little doubt that a significant, and possibly the most potent factor, currently operating in the organic food market is the effort to mimic the type and range of mainstream foodstuffs and all that this entails including globalisation, centralisation, packaging, promotion and purchasing practices.

The justification is that 'this is what the consumer wants', 'as long as it is certified organic it is all right'. But does this food reach beyond the basic level of 'no chemicals or additives'? Does it conform to the principles the organic movement aspires to and, therefore, in our view, does it justify the claim to the term 'organic quality'?



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Surely the organic movement should be a route to changing consumer perceptions? IFOAM and its members needs to address this question. The organic industry needs to climb from under the comfort blanket of the burgeoning organic market and face up to the conflict between the value of local production and consumption and the needs of some countries to export. It needs to recognise the value of limiting the range of products certified in order to prevent the encroachment of genetic engineering and increase the environmental benefits the organic approach has to offer; it needs to honestly address how the market for organic food can really bring about equitable development in all countries.

IFOAM and its members needs to develop a coherent programme for all of this and, crucially, an action plan for changing consumer perceptions so that when someone buys organic food they know they are joining into the organic movement's principles and goals. Ensuring that the term 'organic quality' corresponds to the highest aspirations of the organic movement, and nothing else, is essential to bringing this about.

We must remember that the organic movement is not really in the certification business, is not really in the accreditation business, is not in the facilitating the organic trade business. These things are important but they are only tools to help us in the business that we are really in – the changing the world business.

See p.15 for Angelika Meier-Ploeger's contact address. Lawrence Woodward is the Director of Elm Farm Research Centre. Hamstead Marshall, Newbury, Berkshire, RG20 0HR, UK. Tel: +44-1488-658298; FAX: +44-1488-658503; e-mail: [EFRC@compuserve.com](mailto:EFRC@compuserve.com)

**The majority of organic consumers seem to be risk averse. The dominant factor behind their purchase of organic food is the belief that organic means 'food you can trust'.**