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Do you have to be rich to eat organic?

All-natural foods cost much more because of labor-intensive farming, but lower prices may be on the way

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Danita Bergseng, pushing her cart along a supermarket produce aisle in Southwest Portland, sings a common refrain about whether or not to buy organic food. She likes the idea, but balks at the prices.

"I would buy it all the time," says the wife and mother of a 17-year-old son, "if it weren't so expensive."

So while wild salmon, organic milk and the lovely landscape of Whole Foods beckon, she can't go there.

"I know my food budget would be a third more," she says. "I have a lot of girlfriends who say the same thing: It's the cost."

But how much does organic food really cost? Do you have to be rich these days to join the club? And what exactly are you paying for when you fork over more cash at the checkout line?

At issue inside and outside a booming organic food industry is the question of whether an organic label delivers what it implies: a less polluted, healthier planet; clean, nutritious food on your plate; and a boost for the small family farm.

In future issues, we'll explore how local compares with organic food, and offer a plan for spending your food dollars on the things you value most, whether that's avoiding hormones in milk or keeping farmlands in your community.

But let's start by looking at what you pay for organic, and what you get in return.

Whether or not the perceptions about organic food are true, people who shop organic at the supermarket pay dearly for it. We compared Portland grocers' average prices on meat, milk, vegetables, fruit and a few pantry staples and found a wide gap: Our grocery list rang up at $52.70 for organic, compared with $29.76 for conventional goods. That's a whopping 77 percent more for the organic food.

And there's good reason for that, economists and industry insiders say: It simply costs more to grow things organically. For starters, fruit and vegetable crops require more labor.

Weeds between rows of vegetables on Willamette Valley farms must be hand-pulled, or attacked regularly with a gas-guzzling tractor-tiller, instead of a single application of an herbicide. Every summer in Hood River, clusters of organic apples and pears are thinned by hand, a job that conventional farmers can do with chemicals.

Along with high labor costs, livestock feed is pricier on the organic side of the fence, and compost and other organic fertilizers aren't as cheap or easy to handle. Farmers contend with lower yields and the occasional crop failure.

It's more costly to handle the food once it leaves the farm as well. Fruits and vegetables, meat and milk require separate processing, greater care in handling, and additional inspection.

"Organic should be seen, in some senses, as tying one arm behind your back," says Larry Lev, an agricultural economist in Oregon State University's College of Agriculture Sciences. "There are 900 pages of regulations telling you what you can't do."

And the small- to medium-sized organic farms don't benefit from economy of scale, where the bigger the operation, the less it costs to produce a single apple, a pound of beef, a gallon of milk.

"With organic, you pay the real cost of what it takes to grow the food, handle the food and deliver the food," says Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF), a nonprofit dedicated to improving and expanding the use of organic farming practices. The low cost of conventional food, he adds, doesn't reflect indirect costs,

such as cleaning up polluted water.

But high prices aren't keeping shoppers away.

Nearly two-thirds of us bought organic products in the past year, despite higher prices, according to research by The Hartman Group, marketing research and consulting firm based in Bellevue, Wash.

Organic food sales nationwide have jumped by roughly 20 percent every year during the past decade.

Yet even as scores of Portland parents spring for organic milk at around $5.50 a gallon, many more households can't afford it. That should change soon, with big-box stores and grocery chains getting into the organics game.

Organics go big-time, and big scale

In the next few months, Wal-Mart will unveil 400 organic products, at prices just 10 percent above conventional. Safeway has rolled out its "O" line of organics, with chicken broth, crackers, frozen peas and dozens of other packaged, frozen and canned foods, priced competitively with nonorganic brands. Costco is also bringing more organic products through its warehouse doors.

"It's still a niche market," says Lev, "but it's a much bigger niche."

Back in 1984, Drew and Myra Goodman were peddling organic raspberries from their two-and-a-half acre farm in Carmel Valley, Calif. Now, their Earthbound Farms prewashed salad mixes can be found in supermarkets from Houston to Hong Kong, they operate distribution centers around the country and grow crops on 26,000 certified organic acres.

With national organic standards in place, Oregon Tilth, the state's independent organic certification group, now sends staff around the country and overseas, certifying the likes of Del Monte, Frito-Lay and Heinz, so products can wear the USDA Organic stamp. Clients range from tiny B&P Hill Farm, on two-and-half acres in Sherwood, to Bering Pacific Ranches, a 1.5 million-acre livestock operation in Alaska.

"For the people who are equating organic with small," Lev says, "it's not there anymore. Most of the time it's coming from big farms and long distances. You kind of have to unpack what this organic stuff is."

So what, then, are we getting when we bring home organic food?

Clean food, with a caveat

Consumers perceive organic food as cleaner, but is it?

The basic rules of organic apply, regardless of the size of the farm: few if any synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, which take much longer to break down than nonsynthetic chemicals such as copper and sulfur, and no hormones or antibiotics in meats, poultry or milk. Crops exposed to pesticides in groundwater and rain might contain a higher level of residue, but still much lower than conventionally grown fruits and vegetables.

"All things being equal, organic produce has roughly two-thirds fewer compounds on it," says John Foster, interim Executive Director of Oregon Tilth.

Processed organic foods contain mostly organic ingredients and are made without additives. They are allowed to contain a limited number of "nonagricultural" substances, Foster says, things like dairy cultures, enzymes and leavening agents for breads.

Things are less clear with organic dairy products. According to Consumer Reports, vague language in current organic rules allows large producers to cut corners. At the biggest dairies, such as Horizon Organic's 4,000-cow operation in Idaho, producers may not know what animals eat before they arrive there, or whether they could have been treated with antibiotics.

Happy animals, but size matters

Also at issue is the treatment of animals. At small organic dairies, for instance, cows might spend at least half the year munching on grass outdoors. But at larger operations, where space is at a premium, animals might spend more time in barns eating hay. At industrial-size poultry farms, chickens live in sheds by the thousands. They're eating organic corn but seldom outdoors scratching in the dirt.

Organic milk, says Michael Pollan, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," "increasingly is coming from huge factory farms where you have four or five thousand cows, often somewhere in the desert where grass doesn't grow." The National Organic Standards Board has proposed a new rule, backed by small dairy farmers, requiring dairy cows a minimum of 120 days on grass a year.

Organics come in all shades of green

On any scale, organic farming means building the soil, and cutting out fertilizers and pesticides. "If it's certified organic, you've just abandoned

several hundred agricultural chemicals, whether it's several acres or several thousand," says Scowcroft of the OFRF.

You still must rotate crops, plant cover crops and use other Earth-friendly practices, small or large scale. So yes, in many senses, organic large or small is better for the Earth.

On the other hand, critics assert that big-scale organic encourages a monoculture system of single crops, which lessens genetic diversity. And while cutting out chemical fertilizers trims use of fossil fuels, most supermarket organics travel great distances. When your frozen edamame starts in China, it's burned plenty of oil to get here, and pumped carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Happy farmers -- for now

Does organic help farmers? For now, the answer is yes, especially if you're a dairy farmer. In most of the country demand for organic milk outpaces supply, according to Theresa Marquez, a marketing executive at Organic Valley. So dairy co-ops and big firms entice new producers with financial incentives. Add to that a high price for milk, and you can earn a living on a small- to medium-sized farm. In Oregon, which has 30 such organic dairies, about 10 percent of the state's total, farmers are doing well, "not just financially, but state of mind," says Mike Gamroth, an Oregon State Extension dairy specialist who advises dairies converting from traditional to organic methods. "Every organic producer I talk to says life is easier now that they've made the switch." They're making money, which means less stress, he says, plus they can be husbandry people, rather than business managers.

Life is also good for the Stewart family of Hood River, pioneers in organic fruit-growing who have watched their Columbia Gorge Organic fruit and juice operation prosper, as conventional growers leave the business because of global competition.

But not everyone's sure how long the party will last. Wal-Mart prices should make consumers happy, but ultimately it may push down prices for farmers, making it tougher for smaller operations to survive.

That we're even asking these questions is a sign that organics have arrived, something the founders of the movement should be happy about, says Oregon Tilth's Foster.

But it may be the case that success dooms some of the pioneers.

Rancher John Neumeister of Cattail Creek Farm, a second-generation farmer in Junction City who raises lamb for restaurants and gourmet food stores, can see both sides of the equation.

"If what organic is really about is reforming the entire food system, and that means more people have access to inexpensive, healthier and safe food, that's a good thing," he says. "I think that's what we should be working for. If the corollary to that is a lot of small farms go out of business, I think that's really unfortunate."

Author Michael Pollan doesn't blame big box and chain stores as much as consumers. "They're trying to meet our expectations. Of having strawberries 12 months of the year, tomatoes 12 months of the year, convenience food, lots of cheap food. And in the process of meeting the expectations of the industrial shopper, which is what we've become, invariably you move back toward huge farms and monocultures, and cows living in feedlots. It's all connected."

Scowcroft doesn't see it that way.

"Right now, we don't have the luxury of saying size is good or bad. At 2 percent of the food economy, what that kind of farm does, at an economy of scale, is bring fantastic organic food to an economic strata that we haven't been able to reach before. And certainly the 20,000 acres they're farming on is environmentally happy."

Next up: Some say organic is irrelevant -- locally grown sustainable food is what will save this planet. Read about it June 13.

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