

# Organic foods hit the big time but second thoughts for some

Organic foods are so successful that production cannot keep up with demand. However, there is another snag as well...

Organic foods are a victim of their own success, with production no longer able to keep up with demand while purists claim that the initial ideals of clean, natural and healthy produce have been sacrificed for profit.

Sales grew 15% in Germany last year and by almost 10% in France, with a multiplication of organic brands and the launch of such produce lines by large supermarket chains previously associated with cheaper foods.

Enthusiasm for all things organic began as a movement led by hard-core nature enthusiasts, mainly in northern Europe, but now gains more and more adepts.

A "Green Week" at Germany's agricultural fair saw organic brands with a hall of their own while visitors tucked into organically produced sausages before enjoying a glass of equally pure organic wine.

The flip side of the coin however is that European production is not keeping pace with demand. Many fruits, vegetables and honey must now be imported from places as far away as Turkey and Latin America.

"That poses a problem of credibility," according to Alexander Rogge of the French federation of commerce and distribution FCD.

The organic label refers to methods of production which exclude the use of fertilizers and pesticides and which respect certain norms of animal feeding.

However, for many it is also a profession of faith in a healthy lifestyle that respects the environment -- a view that fits poorly with tomatoes flown from Chile or lamb from New Zealand, generating pollution in the process.

"For many, organic products are regional products," said Rainer Mihr, editor of the German food industry trade magazine *Lebensmittel Praxis*.

## How was it produced?

"What is the situation regarding quality and certification" of imported products, wondered Uli Schnier, who runs a group of Dutch organic distributors.

How can one be sure that dried fruit from Turkey is produced according to the same criteria as those in France, for example?

Beyond the question of certification, for purists the rapid expansion of the sector itself poses a problem.

"We are happy that the commercial sector, including major distributors, has joined the movement," said Alexander Gerber, who runs the German federation of organic food traders.

However, finding organic foods in low-cost supermarkets gives him food for thought.

"These days, quality is seen only from the point of view of the produce," Gerber complained, but organic is or should mean as much more than that, being a broad "respect for the environment and for nature" and linked to "an emotional quality."

For Wolfgang Gutberlet, head of the German supermarket chain tegut: "Organic is not just the lack of toxic elements; it is something that looks at the entire production process."

Organic sausages sold in certain supermarkets may have been made with organically produced meat but they can still contain additives that purists would reject, Gerber explained.

In the end, he said, you get the best products in organic food stores.

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