

# Fueling the urge to grow organic

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Are you ready for the "O" word?

Once reviled as "hippy-dippy counterculture nonsense" by America's mainline food marketers and producers, the "O" word stands for organic food.

After a recent conference on the issue convened by the agriculture commissioners of Vermont, Minnesota, North Dakota, Texas and Washington state — with observers from Maryland and Virginia's agriculture departments — it seems certain that the average consumer better start getting ready for organic food.

Soon.

That's the consensus following the

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agriculture since the end of World War II.

Before the war, this country and the entire world wrestled its crops from the earth using techniques not too dissimilar from those of the ancient Romans.

Instead of the family mule, we became tractor drivers. Instead of cow and chicken manure, we turned to the newly discovered chemicals.

These chemicals, which renewed the soil, killed the bugs and fungus, strengthened our livestock and promised so much, are now the bedrock of American agriculture.

But then over the years came the downside to all this quick new food.

According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates, today more than 2.5 billion pounds of pesticides are released into the environment annually. Chemical companies blend nearly 600 active toxins into some 50,000 pesticide formulas, most of which have not been evaluated or tested by independent laboratories using the latest instrumentation and computer models.

A 1987 report by the National Academy of Sciences said many of the pesticides most heavily used in farming are considered by the EPA to be "probable" or "possible" causes of cancer in humans, suggesting that these could lead to significant numbers of additional cases of cancer over a lifetime of exposure.

Maybe that's why the Washington-based Food Marketing Institute last year reported that 82 percent of grocery shoppers it surveyed said pesticide residues on food were a "serious health hazard."

While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says pesticides pose no health problem, the EPA ranks pesticide residues as the third-greatest cancer risk out of the more than two dozen environmental problems the agency regulates.

## COMMENTARY

second National Conference on Organic/Sustainable Agriculture Policies, which was held under the auspices of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington-based consumer group.

Participants came from 40 states, as well as Canada and several foreign countries, along with academics, government scientists and researchers, congressional staffers and local organic activists and farmers from all across the country, everyone crowding into the downtown Hilton over the March 23 and 24 weekend.

If the organic insiders are even close on predicting trends, our world

Who's right?

Whatever the answer, two powerful forces are driving the organic food urge, and they are so broad and deep, serious policy makers in government and the private sector believe it is only a matter of time before we are all drawn into some kind of organic evolution.

Without question, the key element in this trend is simple consumer demand for healthier, safer food.

At the conference, the feelings of millions of ordinary people may have been expressed by Rosalie Ziomek, a Chicago housewife who founded the Illinois Coalition for Safe Food a year ago.

Her message was a simple declaration that "consumers have the right to know what's in their food, and what's on it."

"But instead of telling us," she complained, "big institutions like government, the food industry and chemical companies behave like people who have plenty to hide.

If consumers are given the truth about farming and food processing practices, she argued, "we could make shopping a political act," spending consumer dollars based on health and safety factors, "not just pretty packaging and slick marketing."

"Armed with this knowledge," she insisted, "consumers could do more to improve the health and nutrition of America than any single action by government costing billions and billions of dollars.

"But because so much money is involved," she charged, "that's why they won't give us the information we need."

Then, there's trade.

If consumer anxiety is pushing

is poised before a new age of agriculture and food supply. No doubt, it'll mean more expensive food, and big problems for government when our elected officials already have a hard enough time with food safety, labeling, nutrition standards, agriculture policies and a host of related questions.

The problem, interestingly, may ultimately be one of language. We're an impatient people, after all. We want answers fast, but we don't care much about nuts and bolts. Too, we are growing to be an uneducated people, ill-informed about even the most basic questions of science.

And organic food, above all else, requires slow thinking and some care with words.

With its almost-impossible-to-describe system of raising and processing foods with little or no chemical interventions, organic food and sustainable agriculture is more than a trend. It's a philosophy, a rejection of the entire logic guiding American

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American agriculture on one end, the emerging economic colossus in Europe is dragging the entire world into new thinking on food.

Little noticed in America, the European Economic Community, or Common Market, quietly began in 1987 to establish legal definitions for organic agricultural processes, the certification procedures, inspection systems and policing mechanism.

Today, the EEC's far-from-completed regulations form a standard the rest of the world is trying to match. Far less emotional than Ziomek's complaint, the reality of a single European market with all tariff barriers scheduled to drop in 1992 stiffens the neck of even the most obdurate opponent of organic food.

The reason?

Europeans like organic food. Already, some 200,000 acres of North Dakota grain farms have been certified organic — with almost all of that going to Euro-buyers — and farmers from Canada to Argentina are petitioning their governments for up-to-date agricultural regulations that "fit" the EEC models.

They're doing it for the trade, and betting that the newly elected democratic governments in East Europe will mimic every concept of their rich Western cousins, likely making Euro-organic standards the universal form from Lisbon to the Urals in the not-too-distant future.

Too, the world took notice last year when European and Japanese buyers of American corn quietly backed out of their contracts.

While federal and state regulators not only missed the aflatoxin — despite a full page devoted to the problem in *The Wall Street Journal* last year — but allowed U.S. grain companies to dump the Euro-rejected grain back into the nation's food bin.