

SEPTEMBER 2009

**ORGANIC
FOOD**

**AARON
BUTTERFIELD**



DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“PEOPLE SHOULD
EMBRACE
ORGANIC FOOD”**

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KEY TERMS

Organic food

Genetic modification

Bio-diversity

Pesticides, Herbicides and Insecticides

Micronutrients

Green Revolution

INTRODUCTION

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Since the early 1990's, organic food has been in and out of the headlines, but following the release of research from the Food Standards Agency (FSA), claiming organic food is nutritionally no better than conventionally farmed produce [Ref: [FSA](#)], the issue has again been brought in to sharp focus. Up until recently, organic was widely deemed the healthy option. Sales of organic produce have rocketed over the past ten years [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and every celebrity, [Ref: [Organic Carsons](#)] from Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall [Ref: [RiverCottage](#)] to Michelle Obama [Ref: [NY Times](#)] has leant the movement their public support.

Critics of organic say that the tide is now turning as the public become disillusioned with organic food. They argue that organic food is neither safer nor healthier than food produced by industrialised farming, just more expensive. [Ref: [Cosmos Magazine](#)]. But champions of organic, such as Peter Melchett of the Soil Association, say that regardless of nutrition 'if it's good for the countryside...it's good for us' [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Beyond nutritional content, the organics debate relates to broader concerns about the environment: proponents of organic food claim that with fewer chemicals in farming we could reduce the impact which agriculture has on the planet and our local environments significantly [Ref: [OTA](#)]. Eating organic, they argue, is the 'ethical' choice. But opponents disagree. Far from conveying an ethical or political position they suggest that 'going organic' is little more than a lifestyle choice and nothing other than 'pure middle class prejudice' [Ref: [spiked](#)].



What makes organic food organic?

In food production, the term organic describes a regulatory system which aims to replace artificial chemicals, like pesticides and fertilisers, with natural substances or alternative techniques. To qualify as organic conventional non-organic pesticides, insecticides and herbicides, are restricted although usage is not completely prohibited. [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. For meat, livestock has to be raised without the use of growth hormones or antibiotics, and generally fed a 'natural' diet. Although the rules differ from country to country, normally genetically modified crops cannot be considered organic [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)].

Is organic food better for the consumer than conventional produce?

Responses to the FSA's research have been varied. Some in the organic camp suspect foul-play on the part of pro-GM biotech and pharmaceutical companies, and accuse the FSA of pandering to big business. Others believe the study is simply flawed. They suggest that those nutrients in which organic is most rich, namely flavonoids and beta carotene, were written off by the FSA as unimportant. Most importantly, they argue, the agency failed to investigate the long term impact of chemicals and pesticides on human health. But critics argue that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that these nutrients improve health, nor any proof that exposure to low levels of pesticide residue are harmful [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Many others have argued that the issue of nutritional content is neither here nor there and that their own support of organic is based on issues like animal welfare and ethical farming [Ref: [Grinning Planet](#)], or that it just tastes better [Ref: [Times](#)].

What can organic food do for the environment?

Supporters of organic food argue that organic farming can help to 'save our environment', by lessening the need for chemical fertilisers, whose manufacture are linked to high carbon emissions. Rodale, a pro-organic research institute, estimate that if all 434 million acres of US cropland were converted to organic practices, the decrease in greenhouse gas emissions and pollution reversal would be equivalent to eliminating 217 million cars – nearly 88 percent of all cars in the US [Ref: [Rodale](#)]. But critics say that we need to get real. They argue that whilst a turn towards organic might curtail emissions, the low crop yields that come with organic production have no hope of feeding a growing world population. [Ref: [COSMOS](#)] Some argue that the solution might lie with genetically modified crops, a technology which they argue has the capacity to increase yield [Ref: [PG Economics](#)] and reduce the environmental impact of food production [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Is it wrong to move outside of the confines of nature?

There is a wider discussion, outside of the debate about health and environmental benefits, that asks whether organic is a progressive method of farming; supporters say yes. In light of our growing awareness of the environmental hazards of conventional methods, organic enable us to work alongside nature to feed soil and control pests, whilst producing healthy, nutritious and natural food. In contrast, they suggest, that conventional methods, and conversely the biotech processed food industry, is exploiting land and the wider environment for short-term gain and profit. But critics question the foundations of arguments relating to the benefits of working in sync with 'nature'. They



DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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suggest that it is only by human efforts to move beyond the confines of the natural world over many thousands of years that agricultural produce is safe for us to consume today. In this respect, “Natural agriculture” says Professor Ottoline Lesyer “is a contradiction in terms” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. By this account, the benefits of organic rest on a popular misconception of what is ‘good’ for us and act as a barrier to introducing the kind of agricultural innovations necessary to feed us all. [Ref: [spiked](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

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Food Matters: Organic Food

Caroline Stacey *BBC News* July 2009

Soil Association response to the Food Standards Agency's Organic Review

Soil Association 29 July

Organic food exposed

Elizabeth Finkel *COSMOS* August 2007

The Great Organic Myths Rob Johnston with response: The Great Organic Myths Rebutted by Peter Melchett

The Independent 01 May 2008 and 08 May 2009

For

A cancerous conspiracy to poison your faith in organic food

Joanna Blythman *Daily Mail* 3 August 2009

Organic Food: No flash in the pan fad

Peter Melchett *Guardian* 03 September 2008

Organic food: the natural choice

Leo Hickman *Guardian* 30 July 2009

Organic food won't make you live longer — but it does taste better

Alice Thomson *The Times* 30 July 2009

Against

Organic food and unhealthy snobbery

Rob Lyons *spiked* 03 August 2009

It's wrong to believe that nature is always best

Robin Mckie *Guardian* 02 August 2009

Who is 'organic' meant to be better for?

Tim Hayward *Guardian* 30 July 2009

Starving? Let them eat Duchy Originals

Suzanne Moore *Daily Mail* 02 August 2009

Further Reading:

Health claims for organic food can be damaging to good nutrition

Mark Henderson *The Times* 30 July 2009

It's good for the countryside and wildlife, which means it's good for us

Peter Melchett *Independent* 30 July 2009

Why organic food can't feed the world

Craig Meisner *COSMOS* 24 September 2007

Organic food gets a raw deal from the FSA

Geoffrey Lean *Telegraph* 31 July 2009



BACKGROUNDEERS

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Organic vs. Non-Organic Farming - The Debate

Royal Society of Chemistry

Are organic foods healthier than the alternatives? Yes: Patrick Holden; The Soil Association. No: Julian Morris; Institute of Economic Affairs

Guardian January 2008

Organic market report 2009

The Soil Association May 2009

Benefits of Organic Agriculture as a Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Strategy for Developing Countries

Adrian Muller *Environment for Development* April 2009

FSA: Organic Report Food Standards Agency

Is organic worth it?

Leo Hickman *Guardian* 31 March 2006

Organic or intensive farming, which is best for the environment?

Food for Change February 2009

Co-existence of GM and non GM crops in the UK can occur without problems

PG Economics November 2003

Background Guide to Organic Food

BBC

ORGANISATIONS

The Soil Association

Friends of the Earth

The Organic Home

Monsanto



IN THE NEWS

Organic food 'no better for health than factory-farmed food'

The Times 30 July 2009

Farmers leave organic food trade

BBC News 01 September 2009

Farmers seek organic 'holiday'

BBC News 31 January 2009

Organic produce 'better for you'

BBC News 29 October 2007

Prince Charles's Duchy Originals seeks deal with Waitrose

The Times 29 July 2009

Organic food sales slump as struggling families opt for cheaper groceries

Daily Mail 29 August 2008

Soil Association 'gives in' to supermarket lobby over air-freighted organic food

Daily Mail 27 January 2009

Organic food really IS better for you, claims study

Daily Mail 28 October 2007

Organic report admits to lack of evidence

The Ecologist 29 July 2009

Organic food under threat

Observer 01 July 2007

Sales of organic food slump by up to 30 per cent

Independent 29 March 2009

Organic food to be cheaper than other produce

Telegraph 02 September 2008

BBC snubs organic food as it teaches us how to eat well

Daily Express 02 August 2009

EU report reveals pesticides in organic food

EurActiv 10 July 2009

Prince of Wales prepares for an organic dispute

Telegraph 02 August 2009

Britain's organic food scam exposed

Guardian 21 August 2005

Food bug danger is trebled in organic chickens

Daily Mail 22 June 2007

Tories back organic industry in GM row

Guardian 05 February 2007

Richard Corrigan roasts organic research

The Times 02 August 2009

Michelle Obama to create an organic 'victory' garden at the White House

Guardian 20 March 2009

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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**“DEBATING MATTERS
TEACHES A WAY
OF THINKING.
INTELLECTUAL
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ENGAGING WITH
IDEAS”**

TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER

