

Organics Redux

"This isn't what we meant. When we said organic, we meant local. We meant healthful. We meant being true to the ecologies of regions. We meant mutually respectful growers and eaters. We meant social justice and equality."

— Joan Dye Gussow, Teachers College, Columbia University,
and former member of the National Organic Standards Board

"You have a choice of getting sad about all that or moving on. We tried hard to build a cooperative community and a local food system, but at the end of the day, it wasn't successful. This is just lunch for most people. Just lunch. We can call it sacred, we can talk about communion, but it's just lunch."

— Eugene (Gene B.) Kahn, founder, Cascadian Farm
and charter member of the National Organic Standards Board



BY JIM PREVORA

Wal-Mart went to its big suppliers, the manufacturers of packaged foods, and asked for organic versions of those same products.

As Moses was fated to lead his people to the promised land but never to set foot in it, so the "organic community" is destined to lose control just as organics hits the big time.

Although portrayed as big companies lobbying to "corrupt" industry standards, it is more accurate to say the people producing and eating organic foods are getting more diverse. The organic community is not so much being beaten out by "big business" as it is fracturing into its many components.

This is in part a result of internal tensions. When Gussow says organic, she means a lot of things beyond the requirements of the National Organic Standards Act. She and many others want a world incompatible with contemporary life. Her vision is not merely organic in the technical sense of not having synthetic ingredients or treatments but organic as encompassing local, seasonal, small scale, leading up to "social justice and equality."

As Kahn's quote implies, others recognize that only a few are prepared to turn every sprig of arugula into a moral decision.

The hard core of the organic community reviles companies such as Whole Foods, Earthbound Farm and Horizon Dairy. Their success bringing organic product to many people makes them suspect because one of the core values of many in the organic community is local and small scale.

The internal contradictions are starting to show. For example, the best environment for growing many products organically is arid desert. If your goal is to help the environment, which growing method helps more — buying a locally grown apple treated with fungicide or an organically grown apple transported in a refrigerated truck

from across the country?

Buying locally keeps local farmers in business, preserves open space and helps conserve the land. Buying from a distant farm does none of those things for your local environment. However, it is impossible to always buy locally grown organic produce if you insist on year-round availability.

What once was a small fringe movement is rapidly going mainstream. With that, however, there is a divorce that will inevitably occur between various ideologies and the National Organic Standards Act.

Plenty of conservative Republicans would like to feed their infants organic baby food. Some people would like to avoid pesticides but have no problem with genetic engineering. Loads of people want things organic but couldn't care less about the details of the rules, such as if Chilean nitrate can be used or not. Whole Foods, although it officially disowns the moniker "Holy Foods", does represent an ideology.

One of the tests of the transformation of the organic industry will be if newer concepts, such as the Publix GreenWise concept, can be successful, even though the corporate parent is more conservative than Whole Foods. Has the organic clientele grown to include many who want organic foods for reasons of taste, health, environment or whatnot but don't buy into an organic "ideology."

Wal-Mart is addressing the changing nature of the organic consumer head-on by attacking organics in a distinct way. Wal-Mart went to its big suppliers, the manufacturers of packaged foods, and asked for organic versions of those same products.

In July, Kellogg will unveil organic versions of Frosted Mini Wheats and Raisin Bran. Organic Rice Krispies are being made

with sugarcane juice instead of high-fructose corn syrup and without BHT, an artificial preservative. General Mills and Pepsi are each working on an organic line.

The price point will be close and the brand familiar, so many a consumer who has never been in a Whole Foods will try organic products. Already, the biggest retailer of organic milk is Wal-Mart, and very quickly Wal-Mart will become the largest marketer of organic foods in the country.

The old organic community is screaming. In trying to drive down prices, Wal-Mart will not be true to the organic community's values. To which, Wal-Mart executives should plead: Guilty as charged. Wal-Mart's values — being the buying agent for the consumer, making product choice available to the mass market at affordable prices, introducing consumers to foods and food types they may have never tried elsewhere — are noble in and of themselves.

It is easy to preach values when you are not responsible for feeding the world, and the ethical objection to the modern food system always leaves out that it can feed so many at so little cost. GMO grains feed billions of poor people around the world. Plenty of people able to afford organics don't want to be blind to the morality of that. **pb**