

# Organics Demystified

Chef Dan Lawrence

Do I buy the organic strawberries or the local ones? With all of this talk about global warming wouldn't it be better to buy the ones grown closer to home than the ones trucked here from California? How do I choose? What's more important the health of the planet or the health of my children? And what about my eggs? Should I buy the cage-free or the free-range or the organic, free-range or the cage-free vegetarian-fed? I mean, what does free-range mean, anyway? And, oh my! What about the burgers for the barbecue? I mean, were these animals given a good life? Did they eat corn or grass? And was that corn organic and aaaargh!!!!

Does this sound like you? Do you spin around in circles in the supermarket reading the display signage trying to decide what to buy based on the most ethical, healthy, sustainable and cost-effective criteria available to you? Do you suffer from Organicitis Petrificus, other wise known as the fear of making the wrong choice when shopping for organic food? Well, hopefully at the end of this article we can help you to get your grocery shopping done in less time, and allow you to feel better about the choices you've made for you and your family's health, without breaking the bank. Here we go.

Let's work up some guidelines for buying organic foods, but first, a brief definition of what the word "organic" means. **"Organic production is based on a system of farming that maintains and replenishes soil fertility without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers. Organically produced foods also must be produced without the use of antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering and other excluded practices, sewage sludge, or irradiation. Cloning animals or using their products would be considered inconsistent with organic practices. Organic foods are minimally processed without artificial ingredients, preservatives, or irradiation to maintain the integrity of the food"** (Organic Trade Association Website).

Two years ago, my wife, Jill, and I decided to begin purchasing strictly organic food at home. Our grocery costs subsequently tripled! Since I do all of the shopping at home, I began to look for ways to control our costs and still eat healthy. It is not always possible, cost effective or even necessary to buy entirely organic. In order to help navigate the food landscape and make decisions on what to buy organic, I use a list of items that I constantly choose organic.

1. Soft fruits: I mentioned strawberries because they are one of the softest fruits you can buy, and, unfortunately one of the most dangerous, as non-organic berries are sprayed with methyl-bromide, a substance the EPA classifies as a Toxicity Category 1 compound. Peaches, raspberries and cherries also fall into this risk category.
2. Bell Peppers: Fifty different compounds are used on conventional peppers to combat pests.
3. Leafy Greens: Greens are grown close to the ground and sprayed with organophosphates.
4. Apples: Apples are often sprayed without discretion up to 10 times during growth cycle and contain some of the highest pesticide, herbicide and fungicide rates post-production.
5. Celery: Celery takes up a lot of water from the ground and 82% of tested celery contains significant levels of pesticides.

6. Milk: Buying organic milk ensures that the feed the cows ate was organic. This is important because any sort of chemical compounds like pesticides are stored in the fat of the animal. It also ensures that the cow was not treated with any sort of artificial growth hormone to boost its milk production. Butter should also be organic.
7. Grapes: Domestically grown grapes are much safer than those grown in countries like Chile, for example, where methyl bromide is used with little discretion. I recommend organic especially when feeding to kids who love grapes.
8. Potatoes: A conventionally grown potato is often grown in fields that have been heavily treated and virtually nothing grows in these fields but the potatoes. Thin skinned vegetables growing beneath the surface of the soil are susceptible to absorption and potatoes test high for multiple pesticide residues post-harvest.
9. Soy: I don't recommend eating lots of processed soy anyway, but when you do, choose organic to be certain it is not a genetically engineered variety.
10. Meats: Conventionally grown birds and cows, especially chicken and beef, are treated with quite a bit of antibiotics to stave off infection through their lives, not to mention their feed.
11. Canola oil: Canola or rapeseed is quite often genetically engineered.
12. Wheat: Most of us eat a great deal of bread, and if you buy whole grain breads which are healthier for you than white, you should choose organic because with the whole wheat berry intact, it is more susceptible to residues (this goes for pasta as well).

Starting with this list will cut your pesticide exposure by up to 50% and help you avoid hours and hours in the grocery store or farmers' market. A good rule of thumb beyond this list is that if you eat a lot of any item, it is best to buy organic.

Also, buying local foods supports local farms and the local economy and ensures freshness, as well as decreases consumption of fossil fuels in shipping.

There are several vegetables that, although treated with chemicals, show low rates of post-harvest pesticides. You can save a little money by choosing conventionally grown varieties of the following: asparagus, avocados, bananas (buy fair -trade), broccoli, cabbage, garlic and onions, just to name a few.

There are some great books to help you with more detail which were used for this article. They are: *To Buy Organic or Not to Buy Organic* by Cindy Burke (very well-researched). *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan and *Harvest for Hope* by Dr. Jane Goodall.

Hope this helps you cure yourself of the dreaded Organicitis Petrifidus shopping virus.

**Wishing you great health!!!**