



The High Cost of Organics

Organic foods began to win the hearts and minds of health conscious consumers in the 60's and in recent years they have really taken off. In a piece called "Cost in Translation" Christy Harrison, editor of *Plenty* magazine and contributor to *Grist* on-line, explores the question of why increasing demand hasn't necessarily made organics as affordable as our high school economics supply and demand paradigm might lead us to hope they would have become.

Harrison points out that although sales of organic foods are growing at an amazing rate of 20% per year, they have not yet reached the point where the number of consumers has changed the affordability of the product. Once the exclusive domain of health food shops and co-ops, organic foods now occupy shelf space in about 3/4 of large American grocery stores nationwide. Like the Virginia Slims lasses organic baby carrots have come a long way, but less than 10% of American consumers are buying organic foods regularly and Harrison cites statistics from the *Nutrition Business Journal* that show the flourishing 10.8 billion dollar industry still accounts for just 2% of the food business in the U.S. Organics are growing, but they have not yet reached the point at which the battle between supply and demand favors average consumers.

Harrison notes that the picture is further complicated by the nature of organic production itself. Not susceptible to economies of scale most of our organics come from small, family run businesses where an increase in distribution does not have the same effect on costs of production that it does in larger operations. Some crops, particularly delicate fruits like peaches and plums are hand picked – a greater demand just means hiring more help for the harvest. (Indeed organic producers have not yet taken to the insanity of breeding square tomatoes so that they can be mechanically picked and canned with greater efficiency! Anyone who has helped with Jay's tomato harvest this summer knows that while Big Beefs can be piled, gently, in large buckets, Brandywines and other delicate heirloom varieties must be carefully handled, laid lovingly in single layers on trays and transported with care to keep their delicate skins intact. Organic food often needs the kind of special attention no machine could give it).

Harrison also notes another factor in what we perceive to be the higher costs of organic foods: the heavy federal subsidies which keep the prices of conventional foods artificially low. When we pay less for non-organic produce in the grocery store the government is picking up the tab for the environmental and healthcare costs that spin off from conventional growing practices, and they are doing it with our tax dollars. Harrison notes that several Western European governments (including Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) have taken to providing incentives to organic producers because they consider the funds an investment in mitigating environmental distress. In 2004 a group of economists at Iowa State University set out to measure the external costs of conventional U.S. agriculture (accounting for erosion, water pollution and destruction of wildlife) and estimated a staggering 5-16 billion annually. Add this to price guarantees and other federal subsidies that go directly to conventional growers and the price of non-organic foods is not quite as low as it appears to be.

Harrison cites Thomas Dobbs, sustainable agriculture economist at South Dakota University who predicts that 1 in 3 American consumers regularly making the decision to buy organic would bring even the most expensive crops (those with a price currently 50-100% higher than their conventional counterparts) to a more manageable 10-30% higher than mass produced foods. So get that cart, head out to the supermarket and shop for the cause!

Christy Harrison's "Cost in Translation" appeared in the online *Grist Magazine*, August 25, 2005. To read the full text visit www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/08/25/harrison-organics/.

It has been summarized (with interpolations) by Charlotte England.



Roasted Beet and Arugula Salad

This colorful salad is perfect for a party because it's not every day that you bother to roast beets – yet they are so worth it!

Salad:

6 medium beets, scrubbed
3/4 cup chopped walnuts or pecans
4 bunches arugula, well rinsed

Dressing:

1/4 cup cider vinegar
1 tbsp Dijon mustard
1 tbsp thawed frozen apple juice concentrate
1/3 cup finely chopped shallots
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp freshly ground black pepper
1/3 cup olive or vegetable oil

To make Salad:

Preheat oven to 400F. Line baking sheet with foil. Pierce beets with fork. Place on baking sheet, and roast 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 hours, or until tender when pierced. Let cool slightly.

Meanwhile, spread nuts in small baking dish, and bake at 400F until fragrant, 5 to 10 minutes. Let cool. Trim and dry arugula, and tear into large bite-sized pieces.

To make Dressing:

Combine all ingredients except oil. Gradually whisk in oil. Spoon half of dressing into large bowl, and set aside.

When beets are cool enough to handle, peel and cut each into 8 to 12 wedges. Add to dressing in bowl, and toss well. (If desired, marinate beets, covered, in refrigerator up to 2 days.)

To serve, toss arugula, beets and reserved dressing in large salad bowl. Sprinkle with toasted nuts, and serve.

Serves 8.

From *Vegetarian Times*, April 2005.

Black Bean Chili with Winter Squash


1 medium winter squash (acorn or butternut)
1 tbsp olive oil
1 large onion, chopped
2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced
1 medium green bell pepper, diced
2 (16 oz) cans black beans, drained and rinsed
28 oz can diced tomatoes
4 oz can chopped mild green chilies
1 tsp ground cumin
1/2 tsp dried oregano
- salt to taste

Cut each squash in half, scoop out seeds, and place in a microwave-safe container with 1/4 inch of water. Cover and microwave until tender, allowing 2 to 3 minutes per squash half. Remove squash and let cool, then peel and cut into chunks.

In large pot, heat oil over medium heat. Add onion and cook, stirring often, until soft, about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients except squash and salt and mix well. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer gently for 15 minutes. Stir in squash and season to taste with salt. Serve warm.

Serves 6.

From *Vegetarian Times*, January 1999.



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Recipes are indexed by individual vegetable.

Comments & Contributions

We welcome your comments and contributions, including recipes! Please send to ubuubok@comcast.net or Provident Organic Farm CSA, PO Box 62, Bivalve, MD 21814.