

The Organic Revolution

The organic revolution has been brewing for decades. Fueled by concerns over pesticides, GMOs, sustainability and a desire for healthier food, consumers have been demanding more organic and non-processed options. What started as a niche movement has now become mainstream.

Organic food sales have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to over \$50 billion today. The organic industry is one of the fastest growing segments of American agriculture, increasing at a rate 20% or more annually. Organic food now accounts for over 5% of all food sales in the U.S.

What does organic mean?

Organic refers to the way agricultural products are grown and processed. To be certified organic, a product must meet the following standards:

- Natural fertilizers: Only natural fertilizers like compost, manure and bone meal are allowed. Synthetic chemicals and pesticides are prohibited.
- No GMOs: Genetically modified organisms and their byproducts are not permitted in organic farming.
- No synthetic pesticides: Only naturally derived pesticides and herbicides are allowed.
- No long-term chemical residue: Organic soil and crops must be free of prohibited substances for a period of time before being certified.
- Organic livestock: Organically raised animals must have access to the outdoors, be fed organic feed and cannot be given antibiotics, hormones or animal byproducts.
- Processed with care: Organic processed foods cannot contain artificial preservatives, colors, flavors or any GMO ingredients.

Why are people going organic?

There are a number of reasons fueling the organic revolution:

Health concerns - Many consumers choose organic to avoid pesticide residues and potential health risks associated with synthetic chemicals. Studies have linked pesticides to health issues like cancer, infertility and birth defects.

Environmental sustainability - Organic farming is seen as more environmentally friendly since it avoids synthetic pesticides and fertilizers that can pollute soil and water sources.

Animal welfare - For meat and dairy products, organic standards require animals to have access to the outdoors and be given organic feed. This is viewed as more humane.

Taste - Some consumers claim organic food tastes better since it's not grown using synthetic chemicals. However, scientific studies have been inconclusive on this point.

Ethical reasons - Some view organic as a more ethical choice since it avoids GMOs and supports a system of agriculture seen as more sustainable and natural.

The organic revolution is changing the food system in a number of ways:

- More organic farmland - The amount of organic farmland in the U.S. has tripled over the last decade to over 2 million acres.
- More organic farmers - The number of organic farmers and ranchers has increased from around 8,000 in the 1990s to over 20,000 today.
- More organic options - Organic products are now available in almost every food category from produce to dairy to meat to packaged goods.
- Higher prices - Organic foods typically cost 10-40% more due to higher production costs and lower yields. However, prices are coming down as the industry scales up.
- Industry growth - The organic industry now includes over 43,000 operations including farmers, processors, distributors and retailers.
- More research - Scientists are conducting more research on the impacts and benefits of organic farming and food.
- New technology - Innovations in areas like biotechnology and data analytics are being applied to organic agriculture to improve yields, traceability and more.
- Supply chain challenges - The fast growth of organic has strained supply chains, leading to shortages of organic ingredients at times.
- Criticism remains - Some experts argue that organic farming is no more sustainable or nutritious than conventional agriculture.

In summary, the organic revolution represents a massive shift in consumer preferences, agricultural practices and the overall food system. While organic remains a small percentage of total food production, its rapid growth signals a desire for change and a rejection of the conventional industrial food system. Whether organic can scale up in a truly sustainable way while feeding a growing global population remains to be seen. But the organic revolution has already transformed how we think about what we eat.