

## Is Organic Food Really Worth It?

These days, organic food can be found in neighbourhood supermarkets like Sheng Siong and NTUC FairPrice, and not just in posh shops. But is it really healthier?

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*Photo: Courtesy of NTUC Fairprice*

What used to be a niche market has made its way to the heartlands.

These days, organic food can be found in neighbourhood supermarkets like Sheng Siong and NTUC FairPrice, and not just in posh shops.

Since October 2014, some of Sheng Siong's outlets have dedicated a section just for organic products. These outlets stock as many as 500 organic items, including vegetables and dry food such as brown rice.

A Sheng Siong spokesman said: "There are some customers who prefer organic products, so we offer organic goods in selected stores to cater to such demand."

The organic trade is taking off.

Supermarket companies NTUC FairPrice and Cold Storage both saw a steady double-digit growth last year compared with the previous year.

Mrs Mui-Kok Kah Wei, senior director of purchasing and merchandising at FairPrice, said: "Sales of organic products at FairPrice stores have grown steadily, with an increase in sales of more than 20 per cent in 2015 compared with the previous year."

"Currently, all FairPrice Finest stores and selected FairPrice supermarkets and FairPrice Xtra hypermarkets feature a dedicated organic section."

These sections sell a large range of organic items such as baby biscuits, milk powder, sweets, cornflakes and spaghetti, as well as shampoos and household cleaners.

A Cold Storage spokesman said that organic products from both the fresh and grocery organic sections have seen a steady double-digit growth year on year.

The range of products being offered under the groceries section has also expanded by 10 per cent compared with the year before.

## **GLOBAL SOURCES**

To keep up with the increasing demand for organic products, both supermarket companies have turned to the rest of the world.

They receive organic produce not just from Singapore, but also from contract farms in Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Contract farming is agricultural production done according to an agreement between a buyer and farmers. This determines the conditions for production.

Mrs Mui-Kok said: "This not only allows us to keep prices in check, but we are also able to maintain high quality standards to ensure the organic integrity of the products are maintained throughout the entire supply chain."

Although most organic products are pricier than conventional food, people still buy them because of the perception that organic food is more nutritious, dietitians say.

Singapore Nutrition and Dietetics Association (SNDA) accredited dietitian Jaclyn Reutens said: "Organic food has become so popular because they claim that no pesticides, hormones and fertilisers are used. It sounds great because nobody would want to consume these chemicals."

Parents form one group of consumers who have driven the sale of organic food here.

Cold Storage said it has found an increasing trend in consumers buying more organic products for babies.

Housewife Candice Tan, 29, intends to provide her two-month-old baby with organic products once he is able to consume solid food.

She said: "My husband and I are selective with our organic food as the prices can get expensive at times."

"We'll definitely give our baby organic food too because it's healthier and safer."

Ms Reutens said that some parents feel that the digestive tracts in babies and young children are more sensitive, so feeding them organic food is safer. But organic food is not a necessity for babies, she added.

"If you have the spending power and it makes you feel safe, go ahead and buy it," she said.

"People believe that too much fertiliser consumption will lead to cancer."

"However, there is no research saying that people who consume organic products won't get cancer."

Mrs Celeste Viviers, a registered dietitian and owner of nutrition and wellness consultancy Nutrilicious, said that there is little research to show that the nutritional value of organic food is significantly higher than regular food.

"It is not proven that organic food is more nutritious than conventional food even though there are less pesticides and chemicals," she said.

Mrs Viviers believes that the Internet and increase in spending power have resulted in the popularity of organic food.

She said: "Within the past three to four years, the Internet has influenced consumers with lots of information about organic food, whether it's right or wrong.

"The spending power in Singapore has also allowed more people to purchase organic products with ease.

"I don't feel that the benefits justify the high cost."

Ms Reutens said that non-organic food is perfectly safe to consume.

"Just make sure to wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly to remove all the soil and dirt before consumption, which is usually part of everyday practice," she said.



*The organic food section at the Sheng Siong outlet in Bedok Central. (Photo: Ariffin Jamar, TNP)*

#### **Local farms gain in organic food shift**

The organic food section at the Sheng Siong outlet in Bedok Central.

The rising popularity of organic food here has been profitable for local farmers.

Quan Fa Organic Farm in Lim Chu Kang has seen an increase in sales of about 35 per cent in the last five years.

Its marketing executive, Mr Fabian Liao, 31, said: "People are getting increasingly educated about how organic food is healthier."

To cope with the increase in demand, Mr Liao said they had to hire more manpower to tend the farm and deliver food to their customers.

Quan Fa grows a range of vegetables such as kai lan, lettuce and cai xin. All the produce is grown without the use of preservatives, chemicals or pesticides.

"The market used to be niche, but people are becoming more aware of how organic food is better for them and for the environment," he said.

Green Circle, another eco-farm in Lim Chu Kang, has also seen an almost 50 per cent increase in sales compared with five years ago.

Its director, Mrs Evelyn Eng-Lim, said: "Many people are shifting their tastes towards organic food, much more so in the past few years."

There is also a more diverse range of customers now.

#### **MORE LOCAL BUYERS**

"A majority of our customers used to be expats, but now half of them are local," she said.

But Mrs Ivy Singh, owner of Bollywood Veggies, reckoned that nothing grown here is entirely organic.

She said her farm does not identify with the term.

"Organic is a seven letter word imported by Western ideology to make people pay more," she added. Instead, produce here should be labelled "kampung" or "village".

"Nothing in Singapore is truly organic," she said.

"Warplanes fly over farmland and we're so small that our neighbour's chemicals will affect us."



The organic food section at the FairPrice Finest outlet in Bedok Mall. (Photo: Ariffin Jamar, TNP)

### Multi-billion dollar organic food market

The organic wave is expected to grow bigger globally.

According to accredited dietitian Jaclyn Reutens, organic food refers to food that has been grown or manufactured without the use of chemicals or pesticides.

She said: "Food grown organically does not use any genetically-modified organisms in their fertilisers, too."

A 2014 report by American market research company Grand View Research said that the organic food market is expected to expand by about 16 per cent, reaching an estimated total value of US\$211.44 billion (S\$295.4 billion) by 2020.

The report said that Asia Pacific is expected to be the fastest growing market for these products, with an estimated compound annual growth rate of 28.5 per cent.

The company said that the "growing adoption of organic food and beverages owing to associated health benefits and eco-friendly characteristics is expected to drive demand".

Consumers worldwide have jumped on the bandwagon.

Ms Reutens said: "Organic food became very popular in the United States several years ago, with lots of advertisements and celebrity endorsements.

"Then it came down to Asia about three to four years ago (and) it has become very popular as well."

*By Mohammad Hariz Baharudin and Seow Yun Rong, The New Paper*