

Going organic



‘You are what you eat’

By Shailaja Desai

The phrase “you are what you eat” is one you have probably heard a number of times. It reflects the direct relationship between the food we consume, and our health and well-being. But to supply growing population needs, simple, plain and raw food has given way to food that has been genetically modified, processed, hybridized, frozen or preserved.

No wonder, making organic food as a lifestyle choice seems to be a growing trend and gaining popularity the world over. Until a few years ago, what seemed like a niche business now seems to be a burgeoning concept with full-fledged stores and even cafes dedicated to offering a wide range of organic produce. Products that just donned the shelves of

health food stores previously are now a regular feature in most big supermarkets, creating a bit of a dilemma in the produce aisle. On one hand, you have conventionally grown fruits and vegetables, and on the other, organic. Both are nutritious, but which should you choose?

Organic - what and why

So what does organic really mean? In the simplest of terms, it refers to fruits, vegetables, and meat, dairy, eggs and poultry that are grown without the use of pesticides, free of fertilizers, synthetic ingredients and bioengineered genes (GMOs). Organic products seem like the kind of food one would welcome any day over conventional food that is pesticide-ridden or essentially GMOs that are not part of what is considered a healthy lifestyle. But why are most consumers

not going organic?

Navigating through the maze of organic food labels, benefits and claims can be quite confusing. Is organic food really healthier? Is it more nutritious? What do all the labels mean? Why is it so expensive?

An interesting conversation with Lokesh Aswani, owner of organic store Down to Earth in Dubai, has shed immense light on the topic. They have been in the organic business for over three years now. Initially, what seemed like a slow start now seems to be a great business with store sales that have almost doubled in the past year. Their active participation in farmer's markets, trade shows and open markets have brought about a huge awareness here in Dubai.

From a price perspective, “an increase in demand leads to higher pro-

duction and encourages farmers to produce more organically” is Aswani’s take on encouraging consumers to go organic.

Another key criterion to encourage the organic movement is to support local farmers which, in turn, supports the local community as well as the preservation of crops and resources.

One such concept and probably the only real farmer’s market in the city would be The Farmers Market on the Terrace, the brainchild of Yael Mejia, Brand Consultant to Baker & Spice Dubai. Active from November to April, they operate in the parking lot of the Jumeirah Emirates Towers, offering a range of fresh, local and organic vegetables like kale, spinach, tender rocket leaves, aubergines, herbs, fruits and local free range eggs, and dairy—all at affordable prices as the local farmers do the selling themselves.

Whether you have never bought organic or occasionally buy some or only buy organic, it would be interesting to note the reasons why one chooses organic.

Geeti Bhatnagar, a resident in Dubai, says, “Bread, lentils, pasta may contain more pesticides. Conventionally farmed grains are

heavily sprayed with toxic chemicals, and because the grains are very small, they are able to absorb more pesticides. I’m gradually switching to buying more organic produce, especially lentils, as they taste so much better than non-organic ones. Yes, prices are typically more expensive as production costs are higher; supply is limited as demand, too, is less.”

“While buying all organic food may not be an easy decision, it would certainly be beneficial to start buying products that are most frequently used such as fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat,” says Poonam Chopra who is fairly conscious about the well-being and health of her family.

Another consumer, Neha Bali, who is health-conscious and has a very holistic approach to eating, says, “We are vegetarians by choice and enjoy the abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables one has access to in Dubai. I may switch to buying certain organic fresh produce, but high prices do not help. Also, just buying a few random organic vegetables may not serve the purpose; it has to be a total makeover to buying only organic. At this point, it all seems a bit confusing, and I need to think about going organic.”

While the organic revolution is spreading awareness about the adverse effects of consuming non-organic food, i.e. obesity,



diabetes, heart disease, most of us are just not buying enough organic food. Perhaps the reason is that organic food can cost up to twice or even thrice as much as its conventional counterpart.

The Environmental Working Group's annual "Dirty Dozen" and "Clean 15" lists are essential tools for figuring out when it is worth spending more on organic produce.

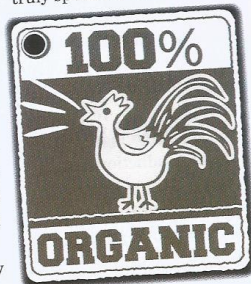
The so-called "Dirty Dozen" are fruits and vegetables with the highest pesticide load making it very important to buy organic versions. For 2013, these are apple, celery, cherry tomato, peach, potato, spinach, hot pepper, strawberry, sweet bell pepper, kale, and summer squash.

Food that you don't have to necessarily buy organic are called the "Clean 15" as they are subject to a low load of pesticides, and are the safest of the conventional food to consume. The ones that made it to the 2013 clean list are onion, sweet corn, pineapple, avocado, cabbage, sweet peas, asparagus, mango, eggplant, kiwi, cantaloupe, sweet potato, grapefruit, papaya, and mushroom.

Organic establishments

With the number of in-

dependent stores and supermarket chains jumping onto the organic bandwagon now increasing, one is truly spoiled for choice.



"Think Green, Eat Green, Be Green" is the motto of The Green League in Dubai. They are committed to providing organic fruits and vegetables via home deliveries, supplying various boutique stores, and catering to the needs of cafes and restaurants. "Our emphasis is on providing the consumer chemical-free produce for a better, healthier and sustainable lifestyle," says Maria Olivia De Nadai.

Other stores that carry organic products are The Blue Planet Green People, providing local farm-fresh goods, and Ripe Me that caters to local fresh vegetables, local Italian cheeses, organic olive oil, fresh bread, and much more.

The Organic Foods Café

not only features healthy fare and fresh produce but also a large range of cosmetics, skincare and supplements; Sophie's Café serves up an array of wholesome and healthy meals using local organic produce, and also offers 100% organic and 100% Fair Trade fresh coffee and organic tea blends.

It is also interesting to come across a range of gluten-free, raw, vegan and sugar-free choices for those with food intolerances or perhaps just looking for a wholesome and nutritious fare at Comptoir 102. "Our menu changes every day as we source locally. Furthermore, we work closely with health consultants and nutritionists that come and train our chefs in developing a selection of healthy options", says Emma, the owner of the café.

Now that's a fairly decent range of places to choose from for your organic needs. A total change may not be easy, but it would be beneficial to start buying organic products that one most frequently uses such as fruits, vegetables and dairy—a solution that could be easy on the wallet in the long run, and contributes to one's well-being and overall health.