

# Organic Food Safety – Navigating Labels and Finding Local Sources

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › In my interview with organic industry watchdog Mark Kastel, we discuss how the organic food industry has grown significantly, but challenges remain with labeling integrity. Local, direct-from-farmer organics are generally more reliable than large-scale commercial organics sold in supermarkets
- › Imported organic products face issues of fraud and regulatory loopholes. "Group certification" allows large agribusinesses to avoid proper inspection, particularly affecting products like hazelnuts from Turkey
- › Nutritional considerations extend beyond organic certification. Even organic practices may not align with optimal nutrition, as seen in chicken feed choices and the debate between brown and white rice
- › Collagen intake and odd-chain saturated fats from grass fed animals are important dietary considerations often overlooked. Plant-based meat alternatives may pose health risks due to high linoleic acid content
- › Consumers can find authentic organic products by buying local, using online resources, checking certifier names, and looking for 100% grass fed and finished meat. OrganicEye provides valuable information for making informed choices

The organic food industry has grown tremendously over the past few decades, but concerns remain about the integrity of organic labeling and certification. In my eye-opening interview with organic industry watchdog Mark Kastel, he discusses the

challenges facing organic consumers and farmers, offering insights on how to find truly healthy, ethically produced food.

Kastel co-founded The Cornucopia Institute, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2024, and is also executive director and founder of OrganicEye. He notes that while the 1990 Organic Foods Production Act was well-intentioned, its implementation has been problematic:<sup>1</sup>

*"Congress, in 1990, passed the organic foods production act. It gave the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] the responsibility to protect industry stakeholders, so farmers, ethical business people and eaters, consumers, protect them from unfair competition and fraud. And the legislation itself is really pretty solid and well-intended.*

*Unfortunately, like a lot of things that happen, it gets handed over to the bureaucrats in Washington and the political appointees of both parties. Something gets lost in translation."*

Kastel explains that, initially, the USDA was resistant to regulating organic food, viewing it as just a "marketing scheme." However, as the U.S. organic food industry has grown to \$61.7 billion annually,<sup>2</sup> large agribusiness corporations have bought out many pioneering organic brands.

This has led to efforts to make organic certification less rigorous and more profitable. Globally, the organic industry is now a \$205.9 billion industry, projected to reach a worth of \$532.72 billion by 2032.<sup>3</sup>

## **The 2 Faces of Organic**



According to Kastel, there are essentially two organic labels consumers encounter:

1. **Local, direct-from-farmer organics** — These include farmers markets, community-supported agriculture (CSAs), and independent local retailers who source directly from farms they know. Kastel states he's found "virtually no fraud on that local level."
2. **Large-scale commercial organics** — This includes major brands sold in supermarkets and big box stores. These products may come from overseas or large industrial operations with less oversight.

The graphic above, created by Phil Howard, a professor with Michigan State University,<sup>4</sup> illustrates how big business has taken over many smaller organic brands. "It really is almost every major brand, and it's very deceptive," Kastel explains.<sup>5</sup>

*"You'll never see General Mills on Cascadian Farms breakfast cereals or Muir Glen tomato products, you'll see Small Planet Foods. Doesn't that sound nice? But Dean Foods bought the Horizon label that's now been sold off a couple of different times ... Smuckers is a giant. They own Santa Cruz juices and Knudsen juices."*<sup>6</sup>

Kastel emphasizes the benefits of buying local organic food: "You're getting food that's more nutritionally dense, fresher, more flavorful, and your dollars stay in your food shed, they're recirculating ... we call this the multiplier effect."<sup>7</sup>

# The Challenge of Imported Organics

One of the biggest concerns in the organic industry is the integrity of **imported organic products**. Kastel explains, "We've helped break some major import fraud partnering with the Washington Post at one point. We've partnered with The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal."<sup>8</sup> He describes two main types of fraud:

- 1. Outright fraud or "organic alchemy"** — Conventional products are relabeled as organic during shipping.
- 2. Regulatory loopholes** — Large industrial farms exploit weak oversight, especially for animal products like dairy.

Kastel is particularly concerned about a practice called "group certification" for imports:<sup>9</sup>

*"Instead of certifying every farm, instead of inspecting every farm, they will allow a group to band together and when that was conceived, even though it was still illegal when it was conceived, it was for very small landholders doing things like bananas, or chocolate or coffee on a half an acre."*

Now, he says, large agribusinesses are using this loophole to avoid proper inspection of their suppliers. Grower/producer groups started out as a way to help small farmers or indigenous groups in developing countries but have morphed to include commercial-scale farms that are escaping USDA oversight.

Only about 2% of the farmers involved in these grower/producer groups are being inspected annually, which means the vast majority — 98% — are not being inspected as frequently, if at all.

"Although almost universally complied with in domestic production, that system has completely broken down for imports," Kastel said in a news release. "A large percentage of all foreign imports, making up a sizable amount of the organic food Americans eat, are coming from 'producer groups,' whose grower-members the USDA has exempted from the requirements to be certified."<sup>10</sup>

For instance, an investigation revealed the USDA's Organic Integrity Database lists no certified organic hazelnut growers in Turkey. Yet, the country is the leading importer of organic hazelnuts into the U.S., at prices close to conventionally grown hazelnuts.<sup>11</sup>

"We can grow hazelnuts in the U.S.," Kastel says, "but they can't compete with hazelnuts from Turkey, which come from these group certifications, where the farms are not even being inspected, and it's forcing our Oregon nut growers out of business."<sup>12</sup>

## **Nutritional Insights – Beyond the Organic Label**

While organic certification is crucial, even organic practices may not always align with optimal nutrition. It's important to look beyond the organic label to truly understand the health impacts of your food choices. This includes feeding practices, even within organic systems. For instance, feeding grains to chickens is a common practice on organic farms, but the ideal food for them would be insects and bugs.

It can be difficult to find enough insects for this purpose, but many organic farmers supplement with grains that are loaded with **damaging omega-6 polyunsaturated fats**. Truly health-conscious organic farmers should consider alternatives like sprouted peas or barley, which result in eggs with healthier fat profiles. Ideally, organic standards need to evolve based on our growing understanding of nutrition.

I don't generally recommend consuming chicken, even if it's organic and locally produced, due to its typically high linoleic acid content – the result of being fed grains high in omega-6 fatty acids. Ruminants (like cattle and sheep) are a better choice for meat consumption because ruminants have an additional digestive compartment with bacteria that can saturate polyunsaturated fats.

This allows ruminants to eat grains without accumulating high levels of linoleic acid in their tissues. Even a food as seemingly simple as rice has important nuances you should be aware of for optimal health. Kastel mentions eating brown rice, but I recommend white rice instead.

This is because the fiber in brown rice can negatively impact your gut microbiome, especially for people with insulin resistance, which is 99% of the population. Insulin resistance causes mitochondrial dysfunction, decreasing intracellular energy, which then impacts the ability of your gut to stay healthy.

White rice is a healthier option because it lacks the problematic fibers found in brown rice. However, no matter which rice you eat, it should be organic. As Kastel notes, rice cultivation is often chemically intensive. He also points out that both organic and inorganic arsenic can be present in rice, depending on the soil it's grown in and past agricultural practices in the area.

## **The Importance of Collagen and Hidden Dangers in Organic Dairy**

We also briefly discuss the need for collagen in the diet, an aspect often overlooked in discussions about organic meat and bone broth. One-third of your protein should be collagen-rich connective tissue, but most people consume only 0 to 1 gram of collagen daily.

Consuming whole animal products and bone broths, ideally from organic, pasture-raised animals is an ideal way to increase your collagen intake. Kastel says:<sup>13</sup>

*"You want to make sure it comes from organic grass fed animals, you can chew on your chicken bones, you can use those beef bones, which are a waste material, because most people don't appreciate this yet. So, when you find your local beef producer, you can buy bones from them on the cheap. And the same thing with organ meats. You can buy those on the cheap because nobody wants them."*

Even within the organic dairy sector, there's a little-known issue with commercial cheeses: most cheeses today are made with **genetically modified rennet**, so make sure you're buying cheese made from raw, organic, grass fed milk and natural animal-based rennet only. Be wary of misleading terms like "vegetarian rennet."

Another reason why grass fed animal foods, particularly full-fat raw dairy, are so important is their content of odd-chain saturated fats. According to research,<sup>14</sup> the odd-chain saturated fats pentadecanoic acid (C15:0) and heptadecanoic acid (C17:0) found in whole-fat dairy are likely some of the most important fats in the human diet. C15:0<sup>15</sup> is the first new nutrient in 75 years to be considered an essential nutrient.

These odd-chain fatty acids are only present in animals raised on pasture, not those fed organic grains, reinforcing the importance of supporting organic farmers who prioritize pasture-based systems. The rise of plant-based meat alternatives, many of which are marketed as health-conscious or environmentally-friendly options, meanwhile, is not beneficial for human health or the environment.

Most fake meat products are made with seed oils high in linoleic acid and will kill you prematurely. Kastel adds:<sup>16</sup>

*"They're not doing the due diligence in terms of scientific research. They're going to convert this to 300 million-plus, guinea pigs, lab rats, your children in this marketplace.*

*And so we should be very cautious ... the big incentive is you can't patent meat, and the profit potential, just like in some of these imitation milks, you have a handful of soy beans and water, and they're selling it for more than conventional milk ... the reason they develop these is economic, not because they're developing something that's healthier – of course, healthier for their bank accounts."*

## **How to Find Truly Organic Food and Take Control of Your Food Choices**

By integrating these nutritional insights with broader discussions about organic certification and farming practices, you can make more informed dietary choices that support both your health and sustainable agricultural systems. The key takeaway is that

while organic certification is a valuable starting point, truly health-conscious consumers need to dig deeper to understand the full nutritional impact of their food choices.

Generally, be cautious about embracing trendy alternatives like fake meat and instead focus on whole, organically produced foods. That being said, how can you find authentic organic products?

**OrganicEye** is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in making healthier food choices and understanding the organic food industry. The website offers a wealth of resources on organic food, farming practices, and industry regulations. Kastel and his team are not selling products; their mission is purely to educate and inform consumers. In addition, Kastel suggests doing the following to find organic, high-quality food:

- 1. Buy local whenever possible** — Farmers markets, CSAs and independent stores that source directly from farms offer the highest integrity.
- 2. Use online resources** — Websites like Local Harvest, Eat Wild, and state agriculture department databases can help you locate nearby farms and markets.
- 3. Check certifier names** — OrganicEye plans to publish a list ranking organic certifiers by trustworthiness.
- 4. Look for 100% grass fed and finished meat** — Be wary of misleading "grass fed" claims that don't guarantee full grass finishing.

While the organic landscape can be confusing and sometimes deceptive, you have the power to make informed choices. By seeking out local sources, understanding labels, and staying informed about industry practices, it's possible to find truly healthy, ethically produced food.

## **Take Action to Protect Organic Farmers and US Organics**

After OrganicEye backed a federal lawsuit demanding that the USDA discontinue their practice of allowing foreign agribusinesses to inspect their own suppliers (a profound conflict of interest), the industry's corporate lobby group, the Organic Trade Association (OTA), suggested that, if the USDA loses the lawsuit, they will simply go to Congress and lobby to change the law to legalize "group certification."

Don't let that happen! Federal law currently requires every organic farm to be certified and inspected annually by independent, accredited, third-party certifiers – not foreign corporations with a financial interest.

Please click the button below and invest two minutes of your time in sending a personal message directly to your congressperson and two U.S. senators, asking them to respect the spirit and letter of the law protecting organic farmers, ethical businesses, and consumers. To leverage your voice even further, please forward and/or share this action alert with your friends, family, and business associates on social media.

[Take Action](#)

## Sources and References

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