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## Organics: The Emperor's New Clothes?

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# THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES?

**Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire** ponders if organic is indeed healthier or if it's just a fad for the woolly jumper brigade...

**D**uring a radio interview this summer Richard Corrigan, owner/chef of the Michelin-starred, Lindsay House Restaurant in Soho, London called for a boycott of Irish chickens describing them as 'appalling' and 'full of antibiotics'. He went on to say that we are 'producing muck – crap', and that he 'would never eat chicken unless it was from a farmers' market'.

Richard described farmers' markets and traditional butchers as 'national treasures' that we should all wholeheartedly support. An Irish Farmers' Association representative retorted 'Mr Corrigan may need some publicity for his new restaurant, but he should not abuse a platform afforded to him by pedalling (sic) ill-informed views about chicken production in this country. All houses must have a controlled environment which ensures that ambient temperature, air quality and lighting meet the needs of the flock throughout the growing cycle'.

The debate about modern intensive farming and food production versus organic food production and farming seems to polarise commentators and consumers alike. Consumer interest in organic food has grown significantly in recent years. The growth of farmers' markets, organic co-operatives (box delivery systems) and organic restaurants and hotels such as Brooklodge at Macreddin Village confirm this trend. A number of years ago the British retailing giant Sainsbury's converted the whole island of Grenada, and some large farms on St. Lucia to organic farming to supply the British consumers growing demand for high quality organic fruit. Some commentators were calling this 'the new era of food imperialism'.

There is often great confusion as to what the term organic actually means. Terms such as free-range, wild, traditional, GMO free are often interwoven and confused with the term organic. So what is organic food and farming? The Department of Agriculture and Food defines organic food as quality food produced to strict, legally backed internationally recognised standards. Organic farming, it notes, represents a different view of farming systems, which puts a strong emphasis on environmentally friendly and sustainable

farming practices, with particular concern for animal welfare. Organic farming avoids the use of synthetic fertiliser, chemicals and/or additives.

One of the consumers' main concerns is how they know the food they are purchasing is in fact organic? In Ireland three independent organic bodies (Demeter, IOFGA, Organic Trust) have been approved by the Department of Agriculture to inspect and certify to the standards referred to above. Farmers, growers, processors and importers have to undergo a stringent annual inspection process, before receiving a licence from one of the bodies to sell their produce as organic. All food produced to these standards is permitted to be labelled with the word 'organic'. This word should usually be accompanied by the code (and symbol optionally) of a relevant approved inspection body. If the product you are buying is not Irish, the label should state its country of origin and display the name and/or code of the recognised EU inspection body, which certified the product as organic.

The choice of growing or purchasing organic food seems to reflect a way of life/personal ethics. To the consumer the first noticeable difference between organic and non-organic food is cost. Organic food production is naturally more costly since less intensive farming methods tend to achieve lower production per hectare. Organic farming is also more labour intensive. Irish people spend a considerably smaller percentage of their income on food than countries like France or Italy. Why are Irish people more than willing to spend money clothing their children in designer labels and sending them to fee-paying schools but unwilling to invest in their diet? If we are what we eat, what are we?

Although many organic enthusiasts argue that organic food is healthier and tastier, reliable evidence is sparse. Blind tastings and nutritional analysis are often inconclusive or

contradictory. In the Department of Agriculture literature on the benefits of buying organic food there is no mention of either better health or flavour. Is the difference just a perceived difference or is there a dearth long-term comparative studies to provide objective evidence? Is purchasing organic food simply an ethical issue concerning the environment and animal welfare?

On the environmental front, one must be aware of food miles. The demand for organic food in Ireland outstrips supply. Due to a combination of climate and scale of operations in Ireland, much of the organic food sold in this country is imported. Are the environmentally sound practices used in growing organic fruit in the Caribbean (or elsewhere) undone when air miles are brought into the mix? I know that less fuel is used in transporting tomatoes from the Canary Islands in winter than would be used in heating Irish greenhouses to produce them locally.

Organic farming began as a radical social movement trying to promote sustainable forms of rural development, but has become incorporated into State policy for farming and the countryside. Sociologist, Hilary Tovey, asks whether this provides a context in which farming and food industry can begin to be 'restructured from below', or does it lead to the deradicalisation of the movement? She concludes that 'institutionalisation will profoundly affect the movement while leaving the state relatively untouched – that the organobureaucrats will become another species of State agents and those who want a 'real alternative, regroup and start all over again'.

Organic food and farming will continue to grow. With the de-coupling of CAP payments from specific production there exists an opportunity for Irish farmers to transfer to organic farming and to tap into the growing market on our doorsteps. It would seem that there is a need for further research in the area. ♦

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