

Reclaiming the Heart and Soul of Organics[1]

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Local has replaced organic as the most dynamic sector of the retail food market. Sales of local foods grew from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and are projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.[1] Organic food sales are still larger, approaching \$20 billion, but organic foods sales seem to be slowing while sales of local foods are accelerating. For many people, *local* has become the new *organic*. In fact, the word “locavore” was chosen by the New Oxford American Dictionary as their 2007 “word of the year.” The term was first associated with the “100-mile diet,” but is described more generally as someone who shows a strong preference for foods made with locally grown ingredients and takes advantage of seasonally available foodstuffs that can be bought and prepared without the need for extra preservatives.[2] Some critics questioned the selection by Oxford, suggesting that local foods might be just a passing fad. To the contrary, the growing popularity of local foods is but the latest phase in a long-term trend that is fundamentally transforming the American food system.

If locavores are asked why they prefer local foods most would likely begin with freshness and flavor followed by food safety and nutrition. However, many also would mention keeping their food dollars in the local economy and supporting local farmers. Others might be motivated by broader issues of food security or reducing fossil energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. Some might simply admit that they want to know where and how their food was produced and who produced it. They want food they can trust; so they buy locally, from people they trust.

These same values are reflected in the principles of organizations that support the local food movement. Slow Food, a worldwide organization with more than 80,000 members, defines its support of local foods as “building food communities.” Their website states, “We believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work, and that all people should have access to good and clean food.”[3] *Good, clean, and fair* have become the watchwords of Slow Food. The Chefs Collaborative is a network of more than 1,000 American chefs who are promoting the “joys of local, seasonal, and artisanal cooking.” Their website proclaims, “Cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the earth and its inhabitants. Preserving and revitalizing sustainable food, fishing, and agricultural traditions strengthen that diversity.”[4] The local food movement represents a continuing quest for food that has ecological, social, and economic integrity.

Today's local food movement is not really new; it is simply a continuation of the natural foods movement begun back in the 1960s when the “back to the earth” people dropped out of the American mainstream. They produced their own food, bought food at farmers markets, and formed the first cooperative food buying clubs and natural food stores. They chose to grow foods organically because they were concerned about the health and environmental risks associated with the synthetic fertilizers and pesticides used by industrial agriculture. However, the philosophy or organic farming was embodied in their communities – in their organic way of life. The natural food movement spread far beyond the “hippie” communities during the 1970s and 1980s, as more people became aware of potential health, environmental, and social problems associated with industrial foods.

The natural food movement laid the foundation for a booming market in organic foods during the 1990s, a period when organic food sales grew at 20% per year, doubling every three to four years. *Organic* labeling formalized the

meaning of *natural* foods. Most of the early market growth in organic foods was for vegetables, fruits, grains, and soy products, reflecting continuing environmental and health concerns linked to use of agricultural chemicals. Persistent concerns about the nutrient deficiency of industrial food products have only recently gained scientific credibility. Animal products, led by organic milk, began to break into organic markets in the late 1980s. Widespread use of antibiotics and growth hormones in industrial livestock operations seemed to be the major concerns for consumers of meat, milk, and cheese. The inhumane treatment of animals in large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) helped fuel demand for free range, pasture based, and naturally raised meat and dairy products. Concerns for the exploitation of family farmers and farm workers also grew as the agricultural operations became larger and more geographically concentrated.

The late '80s and early '90s brought dramatic changes in organic food retailing. By the late '80s, several of the early natural foods cooperatives had expanded into small chain store operations, operating from three to 20 stores. In 1991, Whole Foods, at the time a six-store operation, initiated a consolidation process that ultimately would reshape the natural foods market,[\[5\]](#) and in 1993, Wild Oats followed their lead.[\[6\]](#) During the '90s, prospect for large profits from the rapidly growing organic food market eventually attracted the attention of the large industrial food corporations. Mainstream supermarkets, including Kroger, Safeway, and even Wal-Mart, added lines of organic foods and began promoting organic foods in their ads.

The large corporate food retailers, and the large food processors who supplied them, found it difficult to deal with large numbers of small farms, particularly with the diversity of organic standards and certification programs that existed among different groups of farmers in different regions of the country. They encouraged organic farmers to adopt uniform standards for national organic certification. In 2002, the USDA launched its National Organic Program (NOP) of uniform national standards for certification of organic foods. Uniform national standards facilitated the ongoing industrialization of organics through ever-greater specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. As Fred Kirschenmann predicted in 2000, national organic standards opened the door to corporate consolidation of control of organic production and distribution.[\[7\]](#)

With the industrialization of organics, the share of the organic market held by *independent* natural foods and health foods stores fell from 62% in 1998 to 31% in 2003.[\[8\]](#) By 2006, the Whole Foods chain had grown to 186 stores in the North America and the UK while Wild Oats operated 110 stores in the U.S. and Canada. In 2007, Whole Foods acquired Wild Oats as the organic food market continued to expand. By 2007, mainstream corporate supermarkets had 47% of the organic foods market and natural foods stores and specialty retail chains accounted for 46%, leaving direct sales at farmers markets and cooperative food-buying clubs with just 7% percent of the organic market.[\[9\]](#)

This industrialization of organics was driven by a quest for greater economic efficiency, motivated by prospects for reducing prices for consumers, increasing profits for producers, and making organic foods available to more people in more places. However, with the new national standards in place, organic food was no longer defined by a commitment to historical ecological, social, and economic values that had characterized the natural and organic food movements. The social and ethical values of organic farming were replaced by a set of written rules defining allowable and non-allowable inputs or materials and production practices. Economic values were left to "free-market" competition. The organic movement had sold its heart and soul.

Historically, organic farming had been as much a philosophy of life as a means of producing food. Organic farming has its philosophical roots in the values of biodynamic farming, first articulated in 1924 by philosopher Rudolph Steiner in a series of lectures.[\[10\]](#) "Central to bio-dynamics is the concept that a farm is healthy only as

much as it becomes an organism in itself – an individualized, diverse ecosystem guided by the farmer, standing in living interaction with the larger ecological, social, economic, and spiritual realities of which it is part.”[\[11\]](#) The term *organic* referred to the organization of the farm as a living *organism*. In addition, biodynamic farming was clearly spiritual as well as biological. Steiner was concerned that food grown on increasingly impoverished soil could not provide the inner sustenance needed for spiritual health.

Organic pioneer and publisher, J. I. Rodale, wrote, “The *organiculturist* farmer must realize that in him is placed a sacred trust, the task of producing food that will impart health to the people who consume it. As a patriotic duty, he assumes an obligation to preserve the fertility of the soil, a precious heritage that he must pass on, undefiled and even enriched, to subsequent generations.”[\[12\]](#) Sir Albert Howard began his classic book, *An Agricultural Testament*, with the assertion, “The maintenance of the fertility of the soil is the first condition of any permanent system of agriculture,” which is the foundation of any permanent society.[\[13\]](#) He contrasted the regenerative agriculture of the Orient at the time with the agricultural decline that accompanied the fall of the Roman Empire. He wrote, “The agriculture of ancient Rome failed because it was unable to maintain the soil in a fertile condition.” He concluded, “The farmers of the West are repeating the mistakes made by Imperial Rome.” Organic farming was not just an occupation, it was a sacred trust.

The advocates of organic farming of the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s clearly understood that organic farming required ecological, social, and economic integrity. This historical requisite is recognized in most current definitions of organic farming. The Organic Farming Research Foundation in the U.S. (OFRF) defines organic farming as “a modern, sustainable farming system which maintains the long-term fertility of the soil and uses less of the Earth's finite resources to produce high quality, nutritious food.”[\[14\]](#) The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) goes further in defining organic agriculture as an “agricultural production system that promotes environmentally, socially and economically sound production of food and fibres....”[\[15\]](#) Unfortunately, in establishing national and international standards for organic production, the emphasis shifted from the historical values of organic farming to the specific inputs, materials, practices, and methods that tended to characterize organic farms.

As a result, organic agriculture is being transformed into industrial agriculture. As organic farmer and writer Elliott Coleman has pointed out, “Since the 1930s, organic farming has been subjected to the traditional three-step progression that occurs with any new idea directly challenging orthodoxy. First, the orthodoxy dismisses it. Then it spends decades contesting its validity. Finally, it moves to take over the idea.”[\[16\]](#) When the industrial food system was finally forced to recognize the growing consumer preference for organic foods, it decided to abandon its opposition and attempt to take control of organic food production and distribution. So far, it is succeeding.

Current USDA organic standards are fundamentally incapable of protecting the organic movement from being taken over by corporate food interests. Jim Riddle, who has been intimately involved in the organic movement, including the NOP, has made numerous presentations around the country explaining what he calls the *Organic Constellation of Values*.[\[17\]](#) In these presentations he identifies 23 values which characterize true organic food production. He openly admits that only about one-third these organic values are “clearly included” in the national standards. Another one-third are “somewhat included,” meaning that about one-third of the values traditionally associated with organic farming are “not included” in the USDA organic standards. The USDA organic standards leave out the heart and soul of organics.

If the current trend continues, certified organic production may soon be the exclusive domain of industrial-minded producers, processors, and retailers. The organic producer groups advising governments on organic standards and

certification will soon be dominated by those guided solely by the motives of economic efficiency rather than the organic values of ecological, social, and economic integrity. Organics will become just another gimmick to maximize corporate profits. Organic standards eventually will be changed to more fully accommodate industrial production methods, with little if any regard for historical organic values. Producers will be forced by competition to meet minimum standards at minimum costs, forcing them to adopt industrial methods to survive. The industrialization of certified organics will then be complete.

Fortunately, industrial organics is not the only viable alternative for organic farmers or consumers. Lady Balfour said in 1977, “I am sure that the techniques of organic farming cannot be imprisoned in a rigid set of rules. They depend essentially on the outlook of the farmer.”^[18] Her statement is still true today. Many people want more than industry assurance or government certification that their food is organic; they want to buy their food from people they know and trust. They are placing their trust in the “outlook of their local farmers.” This is what the local foods movement is about. It is an attempt to reclaim the heart and soul of organics. Locavores are not all that concerned about whether their foods are certified to be organic, as long as they know that they are produced with ecological, social, and economic integrity. The natural/organic food movement was a rejection of industrial agriculture. Why should anyone expect an industrial food system to provide them with organic foods that reflect true organic values?

Perhaps someday the local foods movement also will be co-opted and controlled by the industrial food system. If so, another food movement will arise to carry forward the ecological, social, and economic values that spawned the natural food movement – the true values of organics. Eventually, by one movement after another, the global food system will be transformed from the extractive, exploitative systems of industrialization to a self-renewing, regenerative system of sustainability. That’s what the natural and organic foods movements were about in the past and that’s what the local foods movement is about today. To ensure the sustainability of agriculture and of humanity, we must have a food system that reflects the heart and soul of organics, regardless of what name we may give it. To sustain human life on earth, we must reclaim the heart and soul of organics.

End Notes:

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^[1] Packaged Facts, *Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.*, May 1, 2007. <http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/>

^[2] UOP Blog, Oxford University Press, USA, “Oxford Word of the Year: Locavore,”

<<http://blog.oup.com/2007/11/locavore/>>

[3] Slow Foods International website, http://www.slowfood.com/about_us/eng/philosophy.lasso

[4] Chefs Collaborative website: <<http://www.chefscollaborative.org/>>

[5] Whole Foods Market, “Our History, <<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/company/history.html>>

[6] Wild Oats, “History,” <<http://www.wildoats.com/app/cda/cda.php?pt=History>>

[7] Fredrick Kirschenmann, The hijacking of organic agriculture...and how USDA is facilitating the theft. *International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) Ecology and farming*, May-August 2000, also on Organic Consumers Association website, <<http://www.organicconsumers.org/Organic/kirschenmann.cfm>>

[8] Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero, *Clouds on the Organic Horizon: Is organic farming becoming the victim of its own success?* Special to CorpWatch, November 25th, 2004

<<http://www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/tncs/2004/1125organic.pdf>>.

[9] Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero, 2004, *Clouds on the Organic Horizon*, CorpWatch.

[10] Rudolph Steiner, *Spiritual foundations for the renewal of agriculture*. Gardner, M (1924/1993) (ed). Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association of USA: Junction City, OR, USA. <<http://www.biodynamics.com/index.html>>

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[14] Organic Farming Research Foundation (2004) What is organic agriculture? <http://www.ofrf.org/general/about_organic/index.html>

[15] International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (2004) What is organic agriculture? <http://www.ifoam.org/>

[16] Eliot Coleman, Can Organics Save the Family Farm? *The Rake Magazine*, September 2004, Minneapolis, MN, USA. <<http://www.rakemag.com/>>

[17] Jim Riddle *Organic Constellation of Values*, The New Farm -- Regenerative Agriculture Worldwide, Rodale Institute, <<http://www.newfarm.org/features/2005/1105/constellation/riddle.shtml>>

[18] Lady Eve Balfour, “Toward a Sustainable Agriculture--The Living Soil” In *Proceedings of IFOAM international organic farming conference*. Switzerland, 1977. also, Canbarra Organic Growers Assn. <<http://www.cogs.asn.au/>>