

Is Organic Food Marketing Hype?

Six experts, including a farmer and a food critic, square off.

By **Newsweek** | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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Organic produce, and meat and dairy products, are a tiny—although growing—fraction of what Americans spend on food, on the order of 3 percent. And one would expect it to be a fairly uncontentious topic, compared with some that the Intelligence Squared U.S. debate series has tackled over the past year (American policy toward the Mideast, the financial crisis, etc.). But when six speakers—including a farmer and a food critic—squared off this week to debate the proposition "Organic food is marketing hype," the level of passion generated surprised even veteran moderator John Donovan.

The debaters for the motion were Dennis Avery, director of the Center for Global Food Issues of the Hudson Institute; Blake Hurst, a corn and soybean farmer in Missouri and a writer on agriculture; and John Krebs, an environmental scientist and former chairman of Great Britain's Food Standards Agency.

Those against the motion were Charles Benbrook, chief scientist at The Organic Center, which promotes organic and sustainable farming; Urvashi Rangan, an environmental-health scientist and director of technical policy for the Consumers Union; and Jeffrey Steingarten, food critic for Vogue.

The moderator was John Donovan of ABC News. Edited excerpts:

KREBS: As the former head of the Food Standards Agency, I am absolutely not anti-organic. I am pro accurate consumer information, pro healthy eating, and pro scientific analysis. Last week on television I saw a woman say, "I feel really guilty because I cannot afford organic food to feed my children a healthy diet." And that made me cross, because she didn't need to buy organic food to give her children a healthy diet, although six in 10 Americans who buy organic food believe it's healthier. In eight countries which have looked at this issue, in every case they have concluded there is no health benefit of eating organic food compared with conventional food.

What are the supposed health benefits of organic food? Some people think it is more nutritious, that it may contain more micronutrients, vitamins, or antioxidants that are supposed to protect us against cancer. But when you look at all the evidence together, there is absolutely no consistent difference. What about safety, pesticide residues? Two things: organic farmers also use pesticides. They just use a different set of pesticides. But more important, those residues are present, when they are present, in such minute quantities that they are harmless, relative to the natural chemicals in all the food you eat. How many of you have ever drunk a cup of coffee? In one cup of coffee there are more carcinogens than you would get in all the pesticide residues from eating conventionally produced or organically produced fruit and vegetables for a whole year.

RANGAN: Since 1936, *Consumer Reports'* mission has been to educate consumers about marketing hype, and we've come across a lot of examples: "natural," "hypoallergenic," "free range." All of those are marketing hype. They have no standards, no verification. But organic food meets those criteria. It has a comprehensive set of standards, and it is verified.

There are five big reasons why organic offers benefits over conventional production. Organic animals eat a diet free of excrement. Conventional farming in this country picks up chicken litter from the bottom of the coop, filled with excrement, whatever the chickens ate, and animals eat that. It can also include garbage, plastic roughage pellets, and this is what we call a rich protein supplement. It's not allowed in organic production.

Second, organic is free of antibiotics. We feed antibiotics to animals every single day, and antibiotic resistance is a huge public health problem. Third, we feed animals toxic heavy metals, things like arsenic. The arsenic seeps into the ground and contaminates the groundwater. Two last things: organic doesn't allow the use of most synthetic pesticides, and it prohibits composting human waste for fertilizer.

It turns out there are some inadvertent benefits to being healthier to the environment. And that's what [organic production] was designed for. And when we're better to the environment, and better to the animals that we raise, and we don't soak these animals and the ground they're on with drugs and chemicals and heavy metals, that might be better for us too.

HURST: If you've ever driven through the Midwest on a summer evening, your windshield got covered by sticky gobs of insect guts. The bugs are corn borer moths, that cause corn to drop ears, corn stalks to fall over. The insecticide Bt produced by corn grown from genetically modified seed causes corn borers to swell like a balloon and to explode. I find this very satisfying, but using Bt corn disqualifies my crop as organic. Of course our farm lost our chance to be organic some 50 years ago. When commercial fertilizer became

available, yields went up, costs went down, including environmental costs, as we used less resources to produce the same amount of food. When this happens in other industries, it's generally seen as a good thing.

Organic production requires its own set of environmental trade-offs. It takes more land for the same amount of food. It leads directly to more soil erosion because conventional farmers disturb the soil less. This has real environmental costs and implications for world hunger. Every time someone purchases organic food, more water and land are used than to produce the same amount of food on my farm.

We don't have enough manure to fertilize all the acres that are in crops today. We would need 5 billion more cows to produce that manure.

Organic food is trendy, edgy, and advocated by all the right people. It affords a chance to enjoy a sense of superiority over the coupon-clipping bourgeoisie, to identify with beautiful actresses instead of old farmers in overalls. But mostly, organic food is marketing hype.

STEINGARTEN: The forces against good food are very powerful in this country, and it's enough to make you paranoid. To say that organic agriculture could never feed the world sidesteps the fact that conventional agriculture isn't feeding the world, and it's dependent on oil at \$45 a barrel, on a steady climate, and readily available water. There is no doubt that conventional agriculture is doomed. The only question is how soon.

AVERY: Bruce Ames from the University of California at Berkeley, one of the most knowledgeable cancer researchers in the world, tested synthetic pesticides and found about half of them caused cancer in rats at high doses. He was applauded by the organic movement. Then he started testing whether natural compounds caused cancer in rats at high doses. And about half of them did. The reality is that 99.99 percent of the carcinogens you ingest are from Mother Nature, in the plant foods we eat and brew.

The people who buy organic food and offer it to their families want to do the best thing, and I don't disagree with that. But this is now a serious international concern, because we are about to enter the biggest farming challenge the world has ever seen. We will have by 2050 between 8 and 9 billion people. We need to double world food production again, to triple the yields on the best farmland. We will have to turn high-yield farming into higher-yield farming. And the organic farmers can't do this. The earth had 1.5 billion people before we got nitrogen fertilizer; we would still be at 1.5 billion without it.

BENBROOK: In the Midwest, less than 35 percent of the nitrogen that gets applied winds up supporting the growth of the corn plant. Some of the rest goes into the water, and some

volatilizes into the environment. To organic farmers, on the other hand, nitrogen is expensive, because they can't use cheap commercial nitrogen fertilizers. They get it the old-fashioned way with cover crops and legumes and compost, so they use it much more carefully. They don't pollute the water or contribute as much to global warming.

On Blake's farm, you'll be planting corn pretty soon, right? That corn will germinate in 10 days and grow vigorously, capturing solar radiation, pulling up nitrogen from the soil, and producing a crop for about 90 days. After that, from the second or third week in August, that field isn't growing anything. Organic farming is based on a much more diverse set of crops. Organic farmers will get a cover crop on the ground as soon as the corn is harvested, so the fall solar radiation is captured. They produce more per acre because they produce multiple crops.

Organic farmers build soil, they reduce greenhouse gases, they reduce the loss of nitrogen into the groundwater. They promote biodiversity, they don't kill bees, they don't kill frogs, they don't kill beneficial insects. And these benefits are embodied in binding, enforceable regulations.

As in all IQ Squared debates, the audience was polled twice, before and after the speakers, and the side that persuaded the largest number of voters was declared the winner. At the start of the debate, 21 percent agreed that organic food was marketing hype, 45 percent disagreed, with 34 percent undecided. At the end, the figures were still 21 percent in favor, 69 percent against, and 10 percent undecided. The side opposing the motion was the winner.

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