

THE TRUTH ABOUT 'ORGANIC' FOOD

Big money and a lack of oversight has rendered the label meaningless

CATHY GULLI | September 10, 2007|

While working as an independent organic food inspector, Mischa Popoff says he felt like "a police officer without a billy club or handcuffs." When he found four jugs of herbicide -- each containing four litres of prohibited spray -- inside one organic farmer's garage, Popoff ordered crop sampling be done at a lab. But that never happened because, he was told by the certifying body that hired him, "it's too expensive to run tests," Popoff recalls. When he asked a pig producer who also grows certified organic produce to prove that he wasn't putting liquid hog manure on those fields, which is often forbidden under organic guidelines, the farmer couldn't, and the matter ended there.

Popoff, who inspected more than 500 farms in North America over five years before he left the industry in 2003, says that he's suspected 16 instances of negligence and fraud by farmers who were nevertheless certified organic; he is sure of about at least five of those cases. "There's never one rat. There's always more in the wall," says Popoff, who was designated an advance process auditor by the Independent Organic Inspectors Association, and is now a certification consultant. "I don't want to say 50 per cent of farmers are cheating. But I also don't want to say five out of 500 is okay. I can't live with that."

Such pessimistic characterizations of the organic food industry -- valued at more than \$1.7 billion in 2005 in Canada, and predicted to rise 20.6 per cent a year until 2015, according to Agriculture Canada -- have not come solely from Popoff, who lives in Osoyoos, B.C. An official at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) says excess levels of chemicals have been found on organic produce. Food Network celebrity chef Michael Smith, who lives in Prince Edward Island and is ever in tune with local agriculture, doesn't trust the organic standards system because he suspects big business margins have supplanted traditional farming values. "I know it's being gamed," he says. And Perry Caicco, a CIBC World Markets retail equity analyst, tells of a booming industry selling high-margin goods, and facing supply shortages that could loosen the definition of organic food.

All this comes as Canada prepares to implement new national organic food regulations, which were published by the federal government last December. "It's a way of formalizing the standards," says Ralph Martin, director of the Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada, who worked on drafting the rules. But they won't be enforced until the end of 2008, at the request of the organic industry, which needs time to prepare for changes. In the meantime, the industry will continue with the present patchwork system -- which is voluntary in most provinces, and made up of dozens of certifying organizations that are accredited by various standards groups instead of one central body overseeing what qualifies as organic. "Until then, it's status quo," says Michel Saumur, acting national manager for the newly created federal Canada Organic Office.

In Popoff's view, one of the biggest problems with the current organic certification process in Canada is that inspectors rely primarily on paperwork as evidence that proper organic methods have been used. Farmers are expected to keep records and receipts showing what is done to their fields, from crop rotation to fertilization and pest control. But the paperwork doesn't always tell the true story. And CFIA has occasionally found pesticide levels exceeding allowable limits on certified organic food, says René Cardinal, national manager of the CFIA's fresh fruit and vegetable program. Chemical residues can result inadvertently -- when a farmer misreads natural pesticide directions, Cardinal explains, or, adds Martin, if wind and water transport chemicals from nearby conventional farms.

Popoff insists that one of the most effective ways to be sure that fruits and vegetables are organic is to take samples of green plant tissue from the crops while they grow in the field and analyze those in a lab for prohibited chemicals -- at a cost of up to \$500 each test. This is done in the United States now, and the fee is supposed to be absorbed by the certifying body that sent the inspector out. In Canada, however, inspectors with suspicions can only "write it up" for the certifying body, says Popoff, and for the most part standards don't require tests. "Consumers have to ask themselves [if] they want something that's proven on a philosophical basis or on an absolute basis," he says. Some organic certifiers already familiar with Popoff's criticism defend the paper trail system as sufficient for the majority of farmers among whom foul play has never been suspected. They argue the fee of performing more crop sampling would get passed onto consumers via food prices. Lab tests, they say, are ordered in the rare cases when inspectors do have concerns. A few have even accused Popoff, who has started a crop-testing business since disillusion led him to abandon farm inspecting, of exaggerating the need for sampling. "It's good for him to drum up business for his lab company," says Debbie Miller, manager of the Organic Crop Improvement Association, who also worked on developing the new organic regulations.

Popoff, who is writing a book called *Is it Organic?*, acknowledges that he stands to make money if crop sampling gains credibility, but he denies being out only to line his own pockets. He says the current honour-based system shortchanges "the honest organic farmers [who are] forced to compete with dishonest farmers." Not to mention consumers -- testing would ensure that contaminated organic produce doesn't leave the farm unchecked.

Popoff points to the fact that producers can refuse a scheduled inspection or turn away an inspector as they see fit -- and that spontaneous checkups are rare. Industry advocates confirm that while certified organic farmers must undergo an annual inspection, they can make requests about when and by whom that occurs. Miller admits spontaneous inspections are usually preceded by a phone call to the farmer half an hour before the inspector arrives. "Name me one other industry that inspects on a pre-announced visit," Popoff implores. "We're not providing the scrutiny that we should."

Some farmers are buying into Popoff's view. Already a dozen have had their crops tested at labs through Popoff as a way of proving to buyers that they operate with the utmost integrity. Others who might be willing but have already paid the estimated \$1,000 fee to their certifying body this year are slow to pay another \$300 for lab testing through Popoff. (He doesn't charge for his time.)

On the whole, though, Popoff believes, there's a reluctance to expose potential cracks in the system because organic food "is viewed as a fledgling industry. It's like going after janitors. But it's not fledgling." In fact, the organic industry is one of the fastest growing segments of the economy. Today, 80 per cent of North American grocery stores sell some organic produce, according to a CIBC research report. And sales of these fruits and vegetables should hit US\$33 billion by 2010, forecasts Global Industry Analysts in San Jose, Calif. With up to 4,000 new products hitting the market each year -- baby food, natural-fibre clothing, beauty items, all endorsed by doctors and celebrity chefs and marketed at conventions, on TV and in magazines -- organics have gone mainstream. And food is leading the charge -- especially in urban centres such as Toronto, says Caicco, where organic food sales "are growing like crazy."

But this growth, however good for the balance sheets of organic food distributors and supermarkets, could mean more problems for farmers already struggling to meet demand -- which could further compromise the integrity of organic produce. "The greatest looming problem in the natural [and] organic foods area is still supply," warns Caicco in the recent CIBC report. "The supply chain ... is still too primitive and too small to handle the increasing demand ... of the distributors." And growers, he continues, have an uphill battle ahead as they try to quickly convert conventional crops to organic -- a transition process that typically takes three years to complete.

The consequence, as seen already in the United States where similar supply shortages have been unfolding, is the potential relaxing of standards for organic certification. In June, the U.S. Department of Agriculture put forth an "interim final rule" to add 38 non-organic ingredients to the national list of allowable substances for organic products -- at the urging of the country's National Organic Standards Board. "If restrictions are loosened it could begin the collapse of the entire natural [and] organic market," writes Caicco. "Large 'grey' areas would develop between conventional and organic products, and the result would be consumer confusion."

This, of course, is why the new Canadian organic standards, complete with a new logo sticker for certified produce -- will be so significant, say proponents such as Saumur at the organics office in Ottawa. "In 2008, all organic produce for interprovincial and international trade and bearing the logo will have to be certified," he says. But while the regulations will centralize certification and oversight -- placing the responsibility in the hands of the CFIA and Canada Organic Office, not everyone is convinced they will change the way inspections are done on the farms. "[In] the Canadian standards coming up around the corner, there's no mention of how testing should be done," says Popoff. They primarily focus on what organic farming methods and substances are appropriate for use.

For chef Smith, who advocates for community-supported agriculture initiatives such as buying weekly field boxes from local farmers, deficiencies in the organic certification process today come as no surprise. "I've been hearing this for years," Smith says. "I can't tell you how many farmers I know who say, 'Why bother [getting certified]? It's a contradictory morass of regulations that gets in the way of me actually doing anything.' " In a year and a half, however, organic farmers will have no choice if they want to sell outside their province. Smith says that while he is concerned about dubious claims, he supports organic production. Even Popoff recommends buying organic; the only problem, he says, will be "finding food that really is organic."