

ORGANIC FOOD



Food Safety
AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

ORGANIC FOOD

Organic food constitutes a relatively small but growing part of the food supply in many countries, including Ireland. The growth of this sector is expected to continue in the foreseeable future, as the number of consumers seeking an alternative to mass-produced food increases.

The aim of this leaflet is to provide objective information about organic food in Ireland while answering some of the more common questions on this topic.

What is organic food?

“Organic food” is the product of an agricultural farming system that places a strong emphasis on environmental protection and animal welfare. While organic and non-organically produced food may appear very similar, the systems of farming involved in their production can be very different. Food can only be labelled and marketed as organic when produced on a farm certified as organic and inspected by an official certification body.





Organic food versus non-organic food

The question of whether organic food is significantly different to non-organic food with respect to nutritional content or quality is still a matter of public and scientific debate, with published literature supporting both sides of the argument. However, while the nutritional composition and quality of foods can be influenced by the farming system used, other variable factors can also have an effect. These factors include the plant or animal varieties used, prevailing climate, type and condition of the soil and farming practices employed such as irrigation, crop rotation and fertilising regimes.

While the farming systems can differ substantially, it is difficult to distinguish between the end products of organic farming and their non-organically produced counterparts. There is no recognised scientific test to exclusively differentiate between organic and non-organic produce.

However, the presence of certain pesticide residues, growth promoters or genetically modified material in a food product could indicate that the food was not produced to organic standards.

Does organic food taste different to non-organic food?

Taste is a sensitive way of distinguishing between various foods and is even used in some sectors to assess the quality of a food or beverage. However, taste can be a subjective phenomenon that varies from person to person. For example, some people do not like the taste of certain foods, while others find the same food very pleasant tasting.

Similarly, some people claim to be able to detect a superior flavour and taste in organic compared to non-organic food, while others fail to notice any difference. The results of various scientific studies also indicate that taste is not a reliable means of differentiating between organic and non-organic food.

Safety of organic food

Organic food is subject to the same stringent food safety regulations as all food consumed, distributed, marketed or produced in Ireland and is thus considered as safe as any other category of food on the market. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is responsible for coordinating the enforcement of food safety and hygiene legislation in Ireland from the farm gate onwards. Legislation pertaining to on farm food safety activity is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).



Cost of organic food

Organic produce can be more expensive than its non-organic counterpart primarily due to the extensive, rather than intensive, nature of the farming system involved. More intensive production systems benefit from the economies of scale and generally higher outputs while organic farming is more labour intensive, involves lower animal stocking rates with organic feed and seed being generally more expensive.

Pesticides in organic farming

Organic farming can involve the use of a limited number of naturally occurring pesticides. As with any produce, pesticide residues found on organic produce must not exceed accepted safety limits and each pesticide must be authorised for use. Minimum safety standards are set at EU level and enforced through routine inspections by the competent authorities and their designated agencies within individual Member States.

Organic fertilisers

Organic farming uses natural fertilisers made from recycled plant or animal material including farmyard manure. Organic material is composted before use to reduce the levels of harmful bacteria. Though composting does not eliminate the threat from pathogenic microorganisms, the use of farmyard manure as a common fertiliser in organic farming has not been shown to pose a greater risk of foodborne health problems.

As a rule, fresh produce of any type to be consumed raw should be washed with large volumes of clean water to reduce the levels of any surface chemical or microbiological contaminants.

Veterinary medicines and growth promoters

The routine use of allopathic medicines and growth promoters is prohibited in organic farming. Antibiotics, for example, may be used on animals only in the interest of animal welfare and where other options have failed or are likely to fail. If an animal is treated with antibiotics, that animal, or any derived food such as milk, meat or eggs, is not allowed to enter the human food chain for a defined withdrawal period following treatment. The withdrawal period for organic produce is greater than that for non-organic produce and if



further treatment is required, that animal and any derived food loses its organic status.

The use of natural products including herbal remedies and homeopathy in the treatment of animal ailments is permitted in organic farming.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs)

The use of GMOs, or products produced from or by GMOs at any stage of organic farming is prohibited. All food, including organic food, is subject to EU legislation governing GM ingredients. Only EU-authorized GM ingredients are permitted in any food while specific GM labelling is required where greater than 0.9% of an ingredient is derived from a GM source. Organic legislation prohibits the use of the organic label on a food that requires a GM label.

Free range

Free range does not mean organic. Though some non-organic farmers raise animals in relatively open conditions, this, on its own, does not allow for those animals, or any derived food to be labelled as organic or free range. Animal derived food that is labelled organic must have been produced and certified to organic standards that include clearly defined minimum indoor and outdoor areas for use by the animals.

Similarly, eggs and poultry meat that carry a "Free Range" label must have been produced in registered establishments complying with legislative requirements relating to housing, open air runs and stocking density. Registered free range egg and poultry meat producers are inspected regularly by DAFM inspection staff.

Organic beef and Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE)

Contaminated meat and bone meal is considered to have been the main mode of transfer of BSE. The use of meat and bone meal in the diet of ruminants has been banned since 1990 in the EU and was extended to include all food animals in 2001. European Council Regulation EC No 1804/99, which supplemented Regulation EC No 2092/91, brought organic livestock and livestock produce within the ambit of EU rules. Producers and processors of all beef, whether organically or non-organically reared, are obliged to follow stringent rules to ensure the exclusion of specified risk material from the food and feed chain thereby restricting the potential spread of the BSE agent.



Recognising legitimate organic produce

On the 1st of July 2010, the EU unveiled a logo for organic food. This came into effect for all organic food on the 1st of January 2012. The 'Euro-leaf' symbol is compulsory for pre-packed organic food and voluntary for non pre-packed organic food. It indicates that a product can be legally classed as organic because it is in full conformity with the conditions and regulations of the organic farming sector. For processed products, this symbol means that at least 95% of the agricultural ingredients are organic. The code number of the control body, e.g. IE-ORG-01 (IMO), and the place of farming, e.g. EU agriculture/ 'country' agriculture, must appear on all products labelled organic.

In addition to these requirements, organic food must carry the words **Certified Organic** on the label. The code numbers of the five control bodies operating in Ireland are given below (their name and logo may also appear on the packaging):

IE-ORG-01 (IMO)

IRL-OIB2-EU / IE-ORG-02 (IOFGA)

IRL-OIB3-EU / IE-ORG-03 (Organic Trust)

IRL-OIB4-EU (Global Trust)

IRL-OIB5-EU (BDAA)

The certification code that appears on the packaging generally refers to the country of production, e.g. IRL. However, it can also refer to the Member State in which the food was packaged, even if different to the EU country where it was originally produced.

Food can be imported directly from a non-EU (third) country and sold as organic within the EU if that country is on the list of approved third countries that have satisfied the Commission as to their organic certification and inspection standards for those food categories. The use of the 'Euro-leaf' symbol is optional on organic products from a third country, however it is obligatory that the code number of the control body, or authority features on the product label, e.g. AR-BIO-01 (Food Safety SA Instituto Argentino para la Certificacion).





The origin of farming of the agricultural raw materials of an organic product shall appear as follows:

- 'EU Agriculture', where the agricultural raw material has been produced in the EU
- 'Non-EU Agriculture', where the agricultural raw material has been produced in third countries
- 'EU/Non-EU Agriculture', where part of the agricultural raw materials has been produced in the EU and part in a third country

Organic legislation in the European Union

Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007, as amended and associated implementing rules governs the production and labelling of organic food within the EU. The regulation also lays down guidelines for the import of organic foods from non-EU countries into the EU.

The Organic Unit of DAFM is the competent authority regulating organic farming in Ireland and has approved five organisations for certification and inspection services:

1. Institute for Marketecology (IMO)
2. Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA)
3. Organic Trust Ltd
4. Global Trust Certification Limited (GTC)
5. Biodynamic Agricultural Association – Demeter UK (BDAA)

The control bodies have developed the Standards for Organic Food and Farming in Ireland which incorporates Regulation EC No. 834/2007, as amended, and associated Statutory Instruments (S.I.).

S.I. No 30 of 2009 gives effect to Council Regulation EC No 834/2007, while S.I. No. 112 of 2004 and S.I. No 698 of 2007 gives DAFF powers to prosecute non-compliant operators.



Organic imports from non-EU countries

The production standards and control systems in the following nine countries have been deemed equivalent to EU standards and certain organic products from these countries can be imported freely into the EU:

Crop and Livestock products: Argentina, New Zealand and Switzerland

Crop products: Australia, Costa Rica, India and Israel, Japan and Tunisia.

All other third country organic products are assessed for equivalence on a case by case basis.

Useful links

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine:
<http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/organicfarming/>

European Commission:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/organic/home_en

Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association (IOFGA)
<http://www.iofga.org/>

Organic Trust:
<http://www.organic-trust.org/>

Institute for Marketecology
<http://www.imo.ch>

Global Trust Certification
<http://www.gtcert.com>

Biodynamic Agricultural Association – Demeter UK
<http://www.biodynamic.org.uk>

Teagasc: Guidelines for organic farming
<http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2009/927/GuidelinesOrganicFarming.pdf>

Bord Bia
<http://www.bordbia.ie>

For more information about the food safety aspects of organic food, contact:
Food Safety Authority of Ireland
Abbey Court, Lower Abbey St, Dublin 1.
Advice Line: 1890 336677

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