

FUNCTIONALLY ORGANIC

The notion of "functional foods" is not a new concept, but one which is seeing a progressive change in the marketing of food products across the developed world. Heralded some years ago as the "next big thing" in food marketing, it appears that it may be becoming just that - marketing.

The initial perception of functional foods as a concept seems relatively benign. After all, perhaps at last there is a growing recognition that food is more than merely carbohydrates, protein and the odd vitamin source for the mechanically constituted body. Surely by adding the "best" nutrients nature has to offer into standard everyday food sources, we will all be better off?

This has been the argument for example with the GMO rice strain which has higher levels of vitamin A than its highly processed, standard cousin, or the addition of beneficial fatty acids into oil seeds.

It is only when one steps back, one realizes that in fact the "added bonuses" are quite often the initially stripped out nutrients prior to original processing, or worse still are simply there trying to replicate components of the original food item before the modern agrichemical and industrial food system got a chance to modify and breed our food sources almost beyond recognition - at least from a nutritional point of view. The poor cousin modern tomato or anaemic carrots low in carotenoids are the epitome of this.

Worse still these added bonus "functional" components in these food items; vitamin A enriched margarine; Folic acid rich orange juice, (what's next, libido enhancing chocolate?) are the classic end point of reductionist science and the mechanical view of nature that our modern societies have been wooed by for too many centuries now.

Our science of nutrition is still terribly young and crude in its understandings of the nature of things. We have a tendency, almost an addiction, to singling out and reducing everything to its parts.

Whilst a cliché, like organic farming and organic foods, naturally produced food items, ideally traditional varieties which have not been bred for harvesting, storage and sales so much as EATING (as if that was a strange thing), are clearly far greater than the sum of their parts. The ongoing fascination with individual singled out nutrients has some sinister hidden costs, not least a creation of delusion that people are keeping themselves healthy and disease free as a consequence.

It is no co-incidence that organic production bans the use of almost all modern food ingredients such as colourings, flavourings, preservatives, emulsifiers and the like, for two main reasons. One is why not? In other words, we have done well to survive till now without synthetic flavourings and colourings and the like, why do we need them? Organic is proving that we do not and that consumers are willing to pay for this and support this. Secondly we simply do not know enough about the potentially deleterious effects of these products, some being less than a decade old since their invention in chemistry labs.

Like synthetic agrichemicals, all these additives get tested individually in isolation, almost never in combination, which is the way of nature. Similarly with food ingredients. How long is it going to take us to wake up to the fact that nature abhors reductionist interventions? Like vacuums nature moves to supplant them.

Let us only hope that this empty promise of functional foods leads to the real revolution in foods being sought: holistic, organic approaches to the way we produce, sell and consume our foods.

Please submit your anonymous point of view for consideration in upcoming editions of the Australian Organic Journal. All contributions will be considered for inclusion in the outspoken section.

The next edition of the AOJ shall have a comprehensive coverage of the issue of EMS and organic production. Watch out for the Spring Edition, due out September 2003.