

Local and Organic

– are they overlapping trends or an industry divide?

» Can you apply the term, 'eat locally, think globally' to a thriving organic sector? **By Jaime Newborn.**

Momentum from consumers and farmers for food grown closer to home is gathering steam, pushing movements like 'locavore' (eating locally produced food) forward, alongside growing demand for organic.

The pillars on which each of these two movements stand are similar - each one advocates food that is healthy, fresh, eco-friendly and socially beneficial.

Yet there remain critical differences – local food can be grown using the synthetic chemicals which organic prohibits; and organic food can be transported out of the area it was grown.

Now it seems confused shoppers are taking one of two roads – they are pitching the two concepts against one another in a 'local vs. organic' showdown; or are unwittingly blending the two terms together.

Both actions have important implications for organic production, according to Brian Silverman, President of the Produce Marketing Association.

He says in the USA – where more organic food is consumed than anywhere else in the world - consumers believe that when buying organic they are buying local.

He says the term "local" as a marketing weapon is gathering steam. "Local is looking to surpass organic (as a food trend)," he said in a recent PMA conference address.

Neither organic nor local trends have hit the same momentum yet in Australia. But some Australian organic producers say it is imperative that the two issues be defined clearly for domestic consumers.

"Local can be a distraction from the true essence and reason people buy and produce organic," says Rob Bauer, a large organic horticulturalist, who supplies fresh produce nation-wide from land he has tended in Queensland's Lockyer Valley for over two decades.

Rob says he agrees consumers should have the best that's in season, as close to home as they can realistically get it.

But he says it is most important that good food comes from good land – wherever that may be.

"Sometimes it can't be within a stone's throw from where it will be eaten."

He says with a lot of the land around cities now taken over by urban development, farmers who produce close by are less likely to be producing in an eco-friendly fashion.

"You'd have to counteract poor land by increasing your use of inputs and chemicals – not the most sustainable activity, and certainly not something I'd be prepared to do," he says.

"It would be very difficult to be viably farming organic close to many metropolitan regions."

He says conscious consumers should think about where food comes from in terms of soil, rather than car-trips.

"For sustainable farming you can't get away from looking at the soil, no matter how close to the consumer it is.

"Local farmers can still use chemicals and fertilisers that are responsible for a significant amount of agricultural emissions, and which bear a significant environmental and social cost.

"That's not efficient. And it's not organic."

Dr. Andrew Monk, Convenor of Standards for the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA) says the issue is complex.

He says in Australia the term organic has more meaning – "Unlike organic, in Australia, there are no standards in use which define the term 'local'," he says.

"As an organisation, we would say organic, as a holistic package – soil health, animal welfare, land protection, recycling, reduced energy, and prohibition of synthetic chemicals, comes as an un-negotiable first.

"Then local. Ideally, consumers who are concerned should choose both where they can get it, and eat seasonably to boot.

"As supplies continue to grow, and as more producers market specifically to local markets, this in turn will give further choice to consumers who wish to consume that way."

What is local, anyway?

Definitions of the term "locavore" vary. The locavore movement is defined officially as "the trend in using locally grown ingredients, taking advantage of seasonally available foodstuffs that can be bought and prepared without the need for extra preservatives" by

the Oxford American Dictionary. ("Locavore" was also named their official 'word to watch' in 2007).

In the US – where the local movement was started by four women embarking on a '100 mile diet' in San Francisco just three years ago – Mr. Silverman says the accepted 'local radius' by most people has extended to anything up to 500 miles away.

In Australia, as in the rest of the world, there is no official regulated distance for use of the term local.

For example, Food Connect, a sustainable food co-op in Brisbane, defines local as being within a 5 hour radius from their Brisbane centre, with the majority of products sourced within the 2 hour mark.

"This year we have reduced the overall food miles by approximately 10% and eventually the perishables will only be sourced from within 1 hour's travel," says founder Robert Pekin.

Australian group 'Friends of the Earth' have used a "100 km from point of production" criterion as a measure of 'local' to select stall holders for a new Eco Market, which will provide Melbourne shoppers with an alternative to supermarkets from March next year.

"Local production is just one of the criteria we are defining sustainable shopping with" says Cam Walker, FoE Sustainable Food Project Officer.

"Stall holders also get extra points for seasonality, for certified organic or bio-dynamic status, minimal or no packaging, inherent embodied energy, production on a farm with a wildlife covenant, and so on."

When it comes to 'local,' it seems it's up to consumers to find out exactly how far away their food has come from.

Could a 'food mile' focus do more harm than good?

Some studies have found benefits of low food miles are less than those which are derived from sustainable and efficient production.

In a benchmark case in 2007, researchers from Lincoln University found that New Zealand dairy products (produced with low-inputs) which were exported to Britain, generated 35% less emissions per kilogram and 31% less emissions per hectare than conventionally produced items from the UK.

Food Connect, a sustainable food co-op in Brisbane, displays produce at Greenfest at Brisbane's Southbank in October last year.

This is despite the carbon dioxide generated during transport.

It followed that a similar Food Miles report from 2006 also reported greater efficiencies in NZ-produced lamb and apples bound for the UK.

Professor Caroline Saunders, report author, stated the results "Clearly demonstrated the fallacy of using a simplistic concept like 'food miles' as a basis for restrictive trade and marketing policies."

"New Zealand's efficiency factor in trade cannot be ignored," she said.

Some experts also claim that without regulation, use of the word "local" as an eco-friendly marketing tool could become misleading to the point of being illegal.

"It can break the law to mislead people by suggesting a food has environmentally superior qualities if it has travelled a shorter distance," Joe Lederman, principal of food law firm FoodLegal, told the Sydney Morning Herald in November.

Should Local and Organic really be kept separate?

The verdict from most international associations is that there are benefits if both trends can work together.



The UK's organic peak certification and representative group, the Soil Association (SA), seemed to have taken a firmer stance than most last year, when they stated they would not allow air freighted products to the UK to be labelled 'organic' unless they met stringent ethical trade, or Fairtrade standards.

However, following consultation with

concerned stakeholders – including major supermarkets and African organic farming organisations - the SA overturned the decision this January.

Organic air freighted products will now be accepted by the association - who say they have changed their stance so organic producers in developing countries can access the UK market without excessive certification costs.

"The strongest view expressed (by those concerned stakeholders) was that, when addressing air freight, organic agriculture's potential to alleviate poverty and enhance the local environment in developing countries should be a key consideration," stated the SA.

However, the SA say their Organic Standard will keep a sharp eye on airborne products - organic ingredients flown to the UK will be monitored, with a record kept of what and how much was freighted, the origin, and date and port of entry. The SA say currently less than one per cent of their licenses use air freight – "It is an area a lot of producers are trying to get around. We don't want it expanding and that is why we have asked our licensees to monitor the situation."

Dr. Monk says in Australia, BFA remains open to assisting anyone interested in piloting a program to investigate connecting local and organic.

"For example, if someone wanted to trial restricting their market to a 100km radius we would be willing to assist in incorporating that into a marketable advantage, in addition to organic certification."

"What we are not going to do is lose sight of organic as the superior alternative to conventionally produced food, with respect to human and environmental health – whether it's produced next door, or not." <<<◆

Organic certification supports local at farmers markets

ORGANIC AND LOCAL foods unarguably have connections.

Robert Pekin, founder of Food Connect (Community Sustainable Agriculture co-operative in Brisbane, Qld) says this is typically more evident when producers are small scale.

"At present local or peri-urban farmers who are small growers in the main, are more likely to be organic – this reflects a community growing style that goes back a not-too-long century ago," he says.

Dr. Andrew Monk, BFA Standards Convenor, says a section added to the BFA's Australian Organic Standard late last year for Farmers' Markets was designed in part with local organic growers in mind.

"The Farmers' Markets criterion protects organic producers who supply to the markets (typically small organic growers local to the region) from competition coming from products that make false natural/ organic claims."

He says the Standard's requirement that market operators regularly check stallholders' organic certification status, meant consumers could not mistakenly assume market food was organic.

"All stallholders claiming to sell organic produce must be certified by a recognised organic

certification agency, and have the appropriate certification certificate or number on display for verification. If verifiable documents cannot be seen, shoppers will know to look elsewhere for organic goods," he says.

He says a section in the Australian Organic Standard for Group Certification which covers organic villages and joint community schemes, also promotes small growers, particularly in less developed countries and regions.

"Groups applying for this kind of certification can only be constituted by small land holders. Large farming and processing units require individual certification and cannot apply as a group," he says.

He says groups and co-ops are formed around one main production type such as vegetables, herbs or coffee and certified product cannot be sold independently – "certified product must be sold under a group name as part of a co-ordinated marketing strategy".

"This offers market leverage to growers who do not have the resources to take on certification alone."

For more information on standards visit: www.bfa.com.au/index.asp?Sec_ID=135 Group Certification is section 7.8 of the ACO Standards 2006.