

Two interviews:

Serving up more than just food

What do two of Australia's well-known food personalities think about the current state of organics? What are their personal eating and buying habits and why are they vocal supporters of the organic industry? Well, we spoke to Kylie Kwong and Joanna Savill to find out.

Interviewed by MICHELE SMITH

KYLIE KWONG

Kylie is the owner of Billy Kwong, a completely organic and biodynamic Chinese restaurant in Sydney's Surry Hills. She has had popular cooking shows on the ABC and the LifeStyle channel, plus a number of cook books published. She is now a passionate advocate for organic food and fair trade products.



Do you only eat organic food?

Yes I do, everything. My restaurant is all organic and biodynamic too. It's completely organic now and we don't use hoi sin or oyster sauces that we can't get organically. All of the tamari, peanut oil, vinegar etc is made by Spiral.

We only serve sustainable seafood, grass fed beef, organic poultry. Even the hokkien noodles are organic because my uncle makes them.

What's your favourite organic food?

Beetroot – I love it! I grate and pickle it slightly, serve it with a soft-boiled egg, grated carrot and an Asian dressing.

What do you eat that is never organic?

Vegemite on toast! Yep, vegemite is probably the only thing ...

Where do you buy your organic food from? Is it difficult to source?

It's not really difficult to find organic food in Sydney. For the restaurant, I buy seafood from Christies Seafood at the Sydney fish markets. They supply line-caught whole fish and are into supplying sustainable seafood.

The vegetables we get from three sources ... Organic Produce Direct, Back to Eden and ED Organics. I shop at Wholefoods House in the eastern suburbs for my home groceries. It has everything! There has been better availability in recent years but we are still far behind the US and UK.

Do you grow any of your own herbs, vegetables or fruit?

No, I live in an apartment and travel a lot. I'd love to have a farm. In the future, a farm might be something I do.

If you had to choose would you buy an imported organic product or an Australian grown conventional product?

I'd buy Australian grown. It's ridiculous to buy things from other countries – we are so abundant here. Conventional ingredients are OK now and then if the majority of what you buy is organic. I object, for example, to buying organic asparagus from Thailand. I'll just take it off the restaurant's menu.

What I do buy from overseas are fairtrade products.

Fair trade items are all from third world countries – Ghana, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad etcetera – and I follow that cause. I'm helping third world communities so I'm happy to buy overseas for those products; mostly fair-trade tea and chocolate.

Do you try and convert others to eat organically? If so, how?

Every interview I do, every speaking engagement, I'm waving the organics flag. I'm also the Australian and New Zealand ambassador for the Fair Trade Association (www.fairtrade.com.au).

I run Billy Kwongs using our philosophy 'give back to the

LEFT: Kylie Kwong.

community in any way possible – whenever we can, however we can'. It's positive for the planet and ethical and we do it for holistic reasons.

I just want people to get to the point of choice. All I'm saying is 'here is this information. Isn't it interesting? As a consumer, [you should] be in a position of choice.' I recommend reading *The Ethics of What We Eat* by Peter Singer and Jim Mason. It's a bible, a fabulous book.

What do you think needs to change to make organics more popular with Australians?

It's a hard question. It's about changing your whole attitude to life. I think cost is the prime factor that stops more people buying organically. I know it's hard if you've got four kids, on an ordinary wage and organics is more expensive.

The industry has got to take little steps and it grows each year. It's got to happen because the environment is the most pressing topic of the 21st century.

The world is in great need of change in all areas.

JOANNA SAVILL

Joanna is a respected journalist, author and co-presenter of the SBS Food Lovers' Guide to Australia.

For five series, this show has told stories of Australia's rich local culinary traditions, fresh produce and multicultural celebrations involving food.

Joanna writes regular food stories for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Good Taste* magazine and co-authored the *SBS Eating Guides* to Sydney and Melbourne with Maeve O'Mara.

Do you only eat organic food?

No, I don't buy exclusively. But the easily accessible things that are staples I really do try and buy organically.

I'll always buy organic flour, butter, eggs, milk and as many fruit and vegetables as possible.

What's your favourite organic food?

Carrots. I will go out of my way to buy organic carrots. I actually drive just to find organic carrots because they taste so much nicer.

What do you eat that is never organic?

My big weakness is gelato. I haven't yet found a good organic gelato or ice cream. My friend makes a gelato out of local fruit products rather than imported fruit pastes, so that's a start.

Where do you get your organic food from? Is it difficult to source?

I buy from either specialised shops like Macro Wholefoods in Sydney or organic products in local shops and small grocers. I buy some generic items in supermarkets.

I sometimes shop at the markets but there's only one exclusively organic market in Sydney.

There's lots of mislabeling at markets so you need to be careful. Most people who are not wanting to spend their lives shopping, will tend to source things in the easiest manner.

People look for quality and they want personal relationships. Like other things, food is so globalised (we can buy cheap garlic from China). So, some people go out of the way to find locally grown, Australian, preferably organic garlic. People are hunting down the niche stuff.

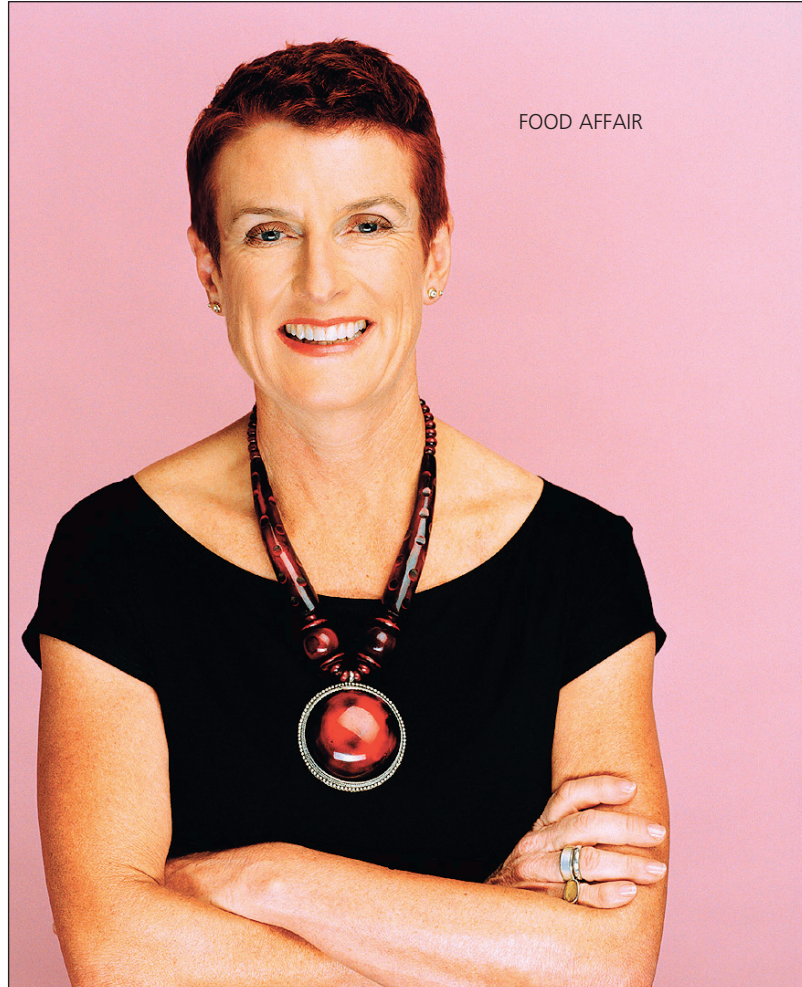
Do you grow any of your own herbs, vegetables or fruit?

Only herbs.

If you had to choose would you buy an imported organic product or an Australian grown conventional product?

It depends on the product and I would look at the quality of it.

For example, there isn't any locally made organic chocolate so if you want organic chocolate you have to eat an imported



Joanna Savill.

product. However, if I had to choose an orange, I can't see the point of buying an imported organic orange out of season, when there are local produce options.

I'm not sure it's as easy as 'chemicals taste bad and without chemicals tastes good'. It has to do with other factors as well. For me there are four criteria which are all important when I shop: organic, sustainable, local and seasonal. Fresh is a given. I try and tick as many of those boxes as possible.

My motivation isn't taste, it's more the notion of sustainable agriculture. Organic agriculture is better for the soil and the future of the soil. This is the most fundamental aspect for me.

Do you try and convert others to eat organically? If so, how?

I'm a journalist who specialises in writing about food. I've spent the last nine years making a television show as well and rather than whacking people over the head I like to have organics there as a subtext.

For example I recently did a story about an organic sheep dairy. I concentrated on the cheese and the story included organics and the difference it made to the soil.

Consumers are asked to bear a lot of responsibility and people are confused. There is so much different information.

What do you think needs to change to make organics more popular with Australians?

I think there are still lots of misconceptions about organics – that it's boringly good for you. But organic things can be out of season, they can come from a long way away and they aren't always going to taste good.

The organics movement is at a crossroads. People got into it for other reasons a long time ago, maybe health and taste, and now there is greater organic production. We should be talking about locally grown, seasonal products – and they may not always be organic.

Plus, certification is complicated. It doesn't help that there's five or six certifying bodies in Australia and I think there needs to be more discussion on this in the industry. ■