



Everything you wanted to know about Organic but were too afraid to ask

» On everything from 'farm to fork' the 'Good Doctor' will answer your questions - be they technical problem solving, market related or general consumer inquiries. **By Dr Andrew Monk**

Q: We are a commercial bakery that has recently received organic certification.

However, we know that a number of our competitors also use the word organic to describe products that (1) are not certified organic, and (2) are clearly not organic.

Are there any moves being made to regulate the use of the word organic? We would love to understand this better so we can factor it into the way we approach the market and promote our product.

Are there any safeguards in place to protect the consumer from unscrupulous dealers (who use the word organic to describe a product that has organic flour, but may also contain preservatives or other ingredients that preclude the product from being organic by your definition)?

A: Firstly, congratulations on your achievement of certification. We recognise it is still a choice to do so in the marketplace, even while it is becoming more difficult for organic businesses not to be certified if they wish to gain market access - not only for export but also for the main formal markets in Australia.

The bottom line is that while there has been talk about legislation that would regulate the term organic, governments rightly look at the organic industry and note it as a paragon of industry self-regulation. Also governments remain in the business of removing themselves from legislative actions wherever they can (notwithstanding the recent financial crisis). So in short it will remain for the foreseeable future up to the good old organic industry and its members to organize and promote the benefits of certified organic products and labels to consumers, while owning and protecting the integrity of the standards by which they are regulated.

Having noted this, the Law is on our side in large measure. There does remain support against misleading marketing claims under the Trade Practices Act.

While there are a number of key standards in action in the world, all are

common in their prohibition of a list of specific agri and food industry chemicals and processes. I would not like to attempt to defend in court the use of ingredients not permitted by any of these standards on the basis of suggesting there is not a clear standard for organic in Australia.

The ACCC has noted that it will consider relevant standards (plural) when assessing such cases.

So what is left is the marketplace, standards that continue to evolve and are managed by industry, and auditing and certification to back this up. This is a long

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shot better than many other industries ever enjoy - however imperfect it ultimately still is.

On the upside, and as has been noted in other marketplaces, the involvement of the government deeper into organic regulation has not always been either a welcome or desirable thing, as the essence and integrity of organic itself can become hostage to political machinations and uncaring bureaucracy.

On the question of products out there not certified or worse, clearly including ingredients not otherwise permitted, please forward these details to us - the BFA has a “dobber line” (email: organiccrusader@bfa.com.au) where people can anonymously do this. Such products that you note, are possibly not permitted by any organic standard in the world, and could rightly in any court be tested and found wanting.

The best, quickest and most exacting court of course is that of the market itself. We have had some positive cases more recently where such product (unregulated, non-certified, non-compliant but in the market)

was brought to our attention by one of the major supermarkets (this highlights the intent and interest from this sector of the market now) and this led to legally worded letters to the people in question and a positive outcome where such product has been removed from the shelves, while other product, fully certified, has been brought to the fore.

This is not a short and simple process, but one that is occurring more as market pressures are brought to bear. We expect more of these sorts of outcomes, even though such product is now less and less in the

marketplace. Also we should never forget that even in countries that have legislated the word organic, such blights on product integrity still exist, and as they say, a law is only as strong as the will to enforce it. Ultimately it will be up to us as an industry to do this.

While the ACCC is not resourced significantly to do much work in this regard, it is through the actions and vigilance of the BFA and our investment in time and investigation, and by working with the ACCC, which will see businesses that continue to skirt these issues now risking their market share and livelihoods as well as reputation.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that organic has the support of a consuming public that wants our industry to continue to stand for helping deliver naturally grown foods and fibres as nature intended. <<<◆

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