



CHANGING TASTES

Every month, Lynda Brown addresses a different aspect of the organics debate. Here, she tackles the question: Is organic food merely a passing fashion or is it here to stay?

Food fashions have been around since the first cookery book was written by the Roman gourmet Apicius in the first century AD. At one time, sugar and chocolate were the height of fashion, bananas a luxury, and cooking with flowers *à la mode*. Chefs also created fashionable dishes, the most famous probably being Escoffier's peach Melba in honour of Dame Nellie Melba in 1893. Most recently, kiwi fruit, sun-dried tomatoes and balsamic vinegar have all captured our imagination – the appeal of organic food, however, will prove more durable than any of these.

Indeed, all the evidence indicates that organic food is here to stay. Manufacturers who have developed their own organic ranges, such as Heinz, RHM and Mars, clearly think so. You've only got to look at the number of organic lines that supermarkets sell to see how mainstream it has become. In fact, recent figures show that household penetration (the proportion of UK population that buys a product at least once in a specified period) of organic food is higher than that of bottled cola, Heinz baked beans, Nescafé instant coffee or PG Tips tea. Baby food is another indicator. Eight years ago there was no organic baby food in the UK. Today, largely thanks to the pioneering Baby Organix brand, one baby in three eats organic food, and the organic baby food market is growing by 50 per cent per year (compared with five per cent for its non-organic equivalent).

Unlike other food fashions, we show no signs of getting bored with organic food, either. Quite the reverse. In the UK – the fastest-growing market in Europe – the organic sector is expected to reach £1 billion by the end of 2003 and make up more than five per cent of the total grocery market by 2005. Meanwhile, the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill, introduced by Paul Tyler MP in November 1999, has set a target of 30 per cent of agricultural land and 20 per cent of all food consumed to be organic by 2010. Sixty per cent of MPs have already signed up in support of the bill.

Worldwide, the statistics are equally awesome, with organic-food sales set to rise by 20 per cent each year for at least the next ten years, and account for two to five per cent of all food sales by the end of that time. In the USA, sales are already over £4 billion

and are expected to double by the end of 2003. But it's not only in affluent western countries that the change to organics is taking hold: Madagascar is described as an 'organic paradise', and the Cook Islands in the Pacific are on their way to becoming the first nation in the world to be totally organic.

This doesn't mean to say that organic food is devoid of fashion. Cranky in the Eighties maybe, a niche market in the Nineties certainly, but 21st-century organic food is fun, funky, exciting – and extremely fashionable. Chic organic cafés and restaurants are in – and not just here. The hippest restaurant in Paris at the moment is Bon, adored for its glamorous decor and state-of-the-art organic food. And then there are all those organic-eating celebrities who add a fashionable stamp of approval, such as Sir Paul McCartney, Nigel Slater and Madonna. Not to mention Prince Charles. What better advert could we have than the future king of our country promoting the cause of organic food and even producing his own excellent Duchy Originals food range?

This new-found confidence is all-pervasive. When did you last buy a boring packet of organic food? Even humble crisps are getting the cool organic makeover as organic manufacturers

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rapidly become the new movers and shakers of the food business. As for trend-setting foods of the future, my prediction for the next big food fashion is organic natural superfoods, such as wheat grass, seaweeds, and designer organic oils rich in omega-3 and -6 fatty acids. Seagreen capsules – a pure and natural food supplement made from organic seaweed – are a sign of the new and healthy organic times. And I predict that this century's most fashionable ingredient will be organic hemp seed – the seeds are nutty and crunchy, they make delicious pesto and you can even buy hemp pasta and ice cream. Remember, you read it here first... For more information about the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill, call Sustain on 020 7837 1228 or visit www.sustainweb.org.