

Going organic to feed the soul

Eco-friendly food is an obligation, some say

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For Mona Salah, a practicing Muslim living in Herndon, getting meat and vegetables for her family involves more than a trip to the local supermarket.

Every six months or so, she and her extended family, who live in the D.C. area, have a custom slaughterhouse near Winchester butcher a locally raised, grass-fed cow according to Islamic dietary laws. She deep-freezes and stores the meat.

For vegetables, she and others in Herndon pick up a weekly shipment of fresh, organic produce from local farms through a Community Sustainable Agriculture group.

She buys organic food "because in the Quran, God says that we are the leaders of the Earth, and we have a religious obligation to take care of it," said Salah, a mother of three.

Salah is one of a growing number of religious people who seeks out organic products - a trend that a coalition of national religious organizations hopes to build upon with their new Sacred Foods Project.

Launched earlier this summer, the effort is the combined work of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Aleph, a Jewish renewal organization, along with an Oregon-based nonprofit, Food Alliance, and a Chicago-area interfaith group, Faith in Place.

"We are promoting the idea that eating is a moral act," said Brother David Andrews, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

The Sacred Foods Project, he said, "invites consumers to think about where their food comes from - about the environment where it's produced, the well-being of workers who harvest it and the farmers who may or may not get a fair price."

Synchronicity

For Catholics, such reflection would follow from the Catholic teaching on social justice, said Andrews, as well as the idea - such as "fish on Fridays" - that eating is integral to religious observance.



Mona Salah cuts organic Roma tomatoes at her home in Herndon on Tuesday. Salah says she and her family rely heavily on organic food in their diet and consider it a mandate from the Quran. "God says that we are the leaders of the Earth, and we have a religious obligation to take care of it," she says. *Jeff Mankie/Examiner*

For Jews, the tradition of following Jewish dietary laws is an obvious starting point, said Debra Kolodny, executive director of Aleph, which recently received a \$200,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for the Sacred Foods Project.

"But the hope is to involve all denominations and religions in the U.S.," Kolodny said. "We want to create a large market demand for foods that are environmentally and socially friendly."

An immediate goal of the project is to encourage religious institutions - such as churches and schools - to order food from suppliers offering organic, locally produced food.

Other strategies may include calling for "reverse boycotts," in which certain organic companies or products are given a religious seal of approval.

Kolodny said there is a new synchronicity between the also-booming kosher food industry and the natural foods industry.

Mordechai Yitzhaky, owner of the dual-location KosherMart in Rockville, the largest kosher retailer in the area, said he started stocking organic kosher chicken breasts six months ago because of customer demand.

"Right now it's a little difficult to find organic kosher meat, but a lot of kosher manufacturers are looking into organic food certification, so I expect to see more products in the next five years," he said.

Options opening up

For Muslims seeking meat that is both religiously approved, or halal, and organic, the options are also slowly multiplying.

The Masjid Muhammad in Northwest is currently raising money to buy a 72-acre farm in Charles County, Md., on which to raise organic lambs, turkey, chicken and goats slaughtered in the religiously mandated way, according to a flier from the mosque.

For now, however, Muslims seeking organic halal meat must make private arrangements, as Salah's family does.

If religiously approved organic food were more widely available, life for Rachel Weintraub, a lawyer and orthodox Jew living in the Shepherd's Park area of the District, would be a lot easier.

"I dream of one-stop shopping," said Weintraub, the mother of a toddler. But when she plans her Friday Shabbat meal - to which she and her husband usually invite eight or more guests - she finds herself making three or more stops in her effort to buy foods that are both organic and kosher.

Weintraub said the effort of keeping kosher and eating organic is worthwhile: "It makes you realize that every time you put something in your mouth, you can make a connection to God." And having kept kosher her whole life, she said she is used to paying a premium for food that meets her religious needs.

This spirit of sacrifice, said Kolodny of Aleph, is what the Sacred Foods Project hopes to strengthen. Many people see organic food, with its higher price tag, as a luxury option.

"For lower income earners, [buying organic] can feel like a financial burden," Kolodny said. As organic food becomes more popular, however, manufacturing systems should become more efficient and prices may drop, she said.

In the meantime, Kolodny said, people with less money can still choose to buy organic food.

"Even in the lower economic realm, people give to charity," Kolodny said. "So think of it this way: If you buy organic and sustainable food, you are keeping local farmers in business, and that's a charitable act."

How it works

Through Community Sustainable Agriculture, groups of people buy a seasonal share of a farmer's produce. Organic fresh fruits and vegetables are delivered each week to a place where the local "buying group" divides the food into individual shares.

- To find a CSA organic farm that serves your area in Virginia, Maryland or the District, visit www.greenpeople.org/csa.htm.

For more information about the

Sacred Foods Project, visit:

- National Catholic Rural Life Conference, www.ncrlc.com

- Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, www.aleph.org

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