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'Organic' not enough for some farmers, activists

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Just when shoppers got familiar with the term "organic," a slew of alternative terms have started popping up.

The rapid commercialization of the organic movement has provoked a backlash by some of the very farmers and activists who popularized organic farming in the first place. They are trying to popularize other terms, many of which are increasingly appearing on labels and menu descriptions at trend-setting markets and restaurants. These include "Biodynamic," "Food Alliance Certified," "local" and even "beyond organic."

Terms like these were unnecessary when the word organic first came into wide use during the 1970s. Back then, organic was a kind of umbrella word, covering everything from a healthier diet to commune-style farming. Today, the definition of organic -- which, as of October 2002, is governed by federal law -- is much narrower. It covers specific chemicals and practices that can and can't be used on a farm or at a factory. Only food producers who comply with the federal organic rules can call their food "certified organic."

The goal of the new terminology is to describe practices not included in the government's organic regulations. For example, the Food Alliance label indicates that food was grown on a farm that met with specific standards for the treatment of farm workers, wildlife habitat and pesticide use. At present, 220 farms are certified, up 33 percent since last year, says Food Alliance, a nonprofit organization devoted to sustainable agriculture that receives funding from foundations and from companies that pay to become certified.

Another term, Biodynamic, describes farms that are almost complete ecosystems (meaning, for instance, that livestock animals create manure to fertilize fields, and that natural predators, like certain insects, provide pest control). In 2004, 150 farms and food producers applied for certification, up from 75 the year before. Use of the term is overseen by Demeter USA, a nonprofit organization based in Junction City, Ore., funded by fees charged for certification.

Other terms, like "local," "sustainable," and "beyond organic" aren't overseen by special agencies but are used by various food producers to indicate alternative practices. For definitions and assessments of some of the new terminology, go to the Consumers Union Web site Eco-labels.org.

The government's imprimatur on organic food was supposed to simplify things, to make it easier for consumers to know what they were eating. But confusion remains. For example, many consumers don't realize that "organic" doesn't indicate food proved to be healthier. Although the Organic Trade Association, a trade group for the industry, says there is "mounting evidence" that organic produce is more nutritious than nonorganic food, many scientists reject this claim. Detailed, controlled analyses

and long-term studies will need to be conducted to settle the question. Meanwhile, lots of organic cookies, ice cream and chips are just as fattening, sugary and salty as any nonorganic alternatives.

Some consumers also tend to assume that organic means no chemical pesticides were used. But organic regulations do allow for pesticides from a list of acceptable chemicals. Some farmers who call themselves "beyond organic" are trying to indicate that they use less chemical pesticide than organic farmers.

Organic also doesn't necessarily mean that the food was grown by small, family farmers. This fact rankles some activists like the Cornucopia Institute, an advocacy group for small family farms. This year, the organization filed complaints with the USDA about three major organic dairies, including one owned by Horizon Organic, a unit of Dean Foods, the largest organic dairy marketer in the United States, alleging that these operations don't comply with organic rules that require cows to feed on pasture grass. Instead, the complaints say, the farms confine cows to feedlots and feed them organic grain, a less expensive method of production. The USDA has started an investigation into the complaints.

Two of the companies say they are in full compliance with organic regulations and that their cows do go out to eat pasture grass; the third declined to comment. In March, the National Organic Standards Board, an advisory group that makes policy recommendations to the USDA, asked the agency to rewrite the rules to make it clearer that organic cows must roam free on pastures whenever possible.

Government standardization triggered a boom in U.S. organic farming: The market generates an estimated \$10 billion a year in sales and has been growing at about 20 percent a year since 1998. Some of the nation's largest mainstream food producers, including General Mills and Groupe Danone, have gotten into organics themselves.

In general, the groups that complain about the limits of the term "organic" are a wobbly coalition. Some of them want more narrow, specific rules, as in the question of where dairy cows roam. Others, however, want to create new, more expansive terms that encompass everything from how far food should travel to reach consumers, to how much farm workers should be paid.

Rick and Kristie Knoll, two California farmers who are widely considered organic pioneers, have stopped using what they derisively call the "O" word. Instead, they use their own, made-up word, "tairwa," to describe their respect-the-land farming philosophy. (It's derived from the French word, "terroir," which translates loosely to "the essence of the land.")

They sell their products at the San Francisco Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, where they discuss with consumers the meaning of tairwa and how it differs from USDA-certified organic. "We're trying to invent it all over again," Knoll says.