



Natural, Organic, Ecological – What’s the Difference, Should You Care?

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If you are like me and get your produce as much as possible from your local farmers market, you probably expect to receive the best quality food money can buy. After all, you are going directly to the source where you can see, smell, touch and sample real food, just as nature made it.

The demand for “natural” food has steadily grown in the U.S. since the 1970s and is now at an all-time high. The underlying assumption is that “natural” is superior to processed, altered or packaged.

Food manufacturers and retailers love using terms that appeal to people’s longing for the real thing, even if it’s nothing of the kind. There is supposed to be 100% natural fruit- or vegetable juice in aluminum cans. Milk and cheese come from “happy” cows that are allowed to roam freely on luscious meadows. Eggs are laid by “free-ranging” chickens frolicking around the old farmhouse. Of course, much of this is mere fantasy, but it sells.

So, how can consumers really know what they are actually buying when labels say “all natural,” “organic” or “ecological”?

Unfortunately, many food products can be sold as “natural,” regardless whether the facts back up the claim or not. In the U.S., there is no legal definition of terms and phrases like “natural,” “100% natural,” “all natural ingredients,” etc. The *Food and Drug Administration* (FDA) actually discourages food manufacturers from using these words because consumers may believe that “natural” is equal or even superior to “organic,” which is clearly not the case.

The *U.S. Department of Agriculture* (USDA) describes the meaning of “natural” somewhat vaguely as food that has undergone “minimal processing,” which also excludes the use of artificial ingredients and added colors. But meat from animals that were treated with artificial hormones and that was injected with saline solution to add flavor may still be advertised as “natural,” to name just one example among countless others. In other words, the predicate “natural” is often not worth the shiny label it’s printed on.

By contrast, the term “organic” is clearly defined and highly regulated in most countries, although standards vary. Organic food production is a system that is managed in accordance with the *Organic Foods Production Act* (OFPA) of 1990 by the USDA.

For food products to be certified “organic,” the producers have to comply with a number of strictly controlled conditions and processes, such as avoidance of synthetic chemicals and substances like fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, additives. The land on which “organic” plant

foods are grown have to be free from prohibited synthetic chemicals for at least three years or more.

Also excluded are the uses of genetically modified organism, irradiation and biosolids. Certification for organic animal food products forbids the use of growth hormones, antibiotics and genetically modified feed or animal by-products in raising of livestock. Organic eggs have to come from chickens that are both cage-free and free-range.

“Organic” products have to be physically separated from their non-certified counterparts to avoid cross-pollution. Keeping detailed written production and sales records, including documentation of storage, processing, packaging and shipping is also required. Periodic on-site inspections are conducted to make sure that no violations occur.

In the U.S., for processed foods to be labeled “organic,” they must contain at least 95 percent organic ingredients. Products that have a minimum of 70 percent organic ingredients can use the label “contains organic ingredients.”

Principally, any business involved in food production can be certified “organic,” including seed suppliers, growers, food processors, retailers and even restaurants as long as they remain in compliance with the requirements. The certification process, however, is expensive and many small farm operators choose to forgo certification even if their practices meet or exceed those required by the USDA.

“Ecological” farming, a.k.a. “sustainable” agriculture is, like “natural,” a much less defined description. Generally speaking, “ecological” farming uses principles that are based on the desire to maintain harmonious relationships between food production and the environment. Central elements are sensible and prudent use of natural resources, such as soil, water and livestock; respect for biological cycles and controls; long-term economic viability of farm operations as well as enhancement of life for farmers and society as a whole.

The issue of “ecological” or “sustainable” agriculture was briefly addressed by congress in the 1990 farm bill, but not much has been done about it ever since. Private organizations like the *Food Alliance* and *Protected Harvest* have started to establish some standards and bestow their own certifications, which, of course, have no legal binding power.

So, the question for consumers remains: Is it worth buying foods that may be healthier, more trustworthy and kinder to the environment – but are often much more costly than their regular counterparts? There is no easy answer to that.

I personally try to eat as healthy as I can. To stay within a reasonable budget, I mostly buy locally grown foods when they are in season. Foods I eat raw, like fruits, carrots, tomatoes etc., I preferably buy “organic” to avoid exposure to pesticides. With produce I can wash, peel and cook, I feel comfortable using the regular kind. Animal products are another matter. I usually buy wild-caught fish (not farmed) and poultry that (I think) comes from reliable sources. Other than that, I have to trust that doing my best to shop smartly will more or less keep me out of harms way.

Timi Gustafson R.D. is a clinical dietitian and author of the book “The Healthy Diner – How to Eat Right and Still Have Fun”®