



# GO Organic!

A rough guide to clean foods

**What's with the food we are eating, anyway?**  
The Director of the Organic Farming Association of India and Editor of the *Organic Farming Sourcebook* on what's wrong with our food and how we can make it better

■ BY CLAUDE ALVARES

THE SUPREME COURT of India recently banned the production and sale of endosulphan. This toxic chemical, banned already in several countries, was still being used on food crops which you and I consume. In places like Kerala, the intensive use of the chemical had led to numerous physical deformations in people, mostly children.

Let's see what may have disturbed the Court (it will probably disturb you too). A study in Bhopal showed that infants on breastmilk were taking in 8.6 times more endosulphan and 4.1 times more malathion than the average daily intake allowed by the WHO.





**It seems urban Indians have awoken to the fact that its modernity comes laced with poisons and its food comes packed to do collateral damage.**

Several studies, carried out across cities like Ludhiana, Mumbai and Hissar revealed heavy doses of organochlorine pesticides, including endosulphan, higher than permissible limits in food samples. But endosulphan is just one threat to your well-being that comes to you wrapped innocently in your food. There are hundreds of others, some more toxic than endosulphan.

Most states are culpable, however, here's an example. Punjab has fed the country with surplus wheat and rice for years. To produce these huge harvests, farmers in Punjab (and Haryana) used equally heavy doses of subsidised chemicals and pesticides. So much so that the Parliament was recently informed of a train called the "Cancer Express" that leaves Bhatinda weekly carrying 50-60 cancer patients to Bikaner. Most of these cases are now being traced back to the deadly chemicals used in their agricultural practices which have now permanently contaminated the ground water.

However, following instances like the cola controversy, it seems urban Indians have awoken to the fact that its modernity comes laced with poisons and its food comes packed to do collateral damage. But most of us are unaware of our options and believe that chemical fertilisers are needed to grow enough food to feed the population and that unless we spray dangerous pesticides, insects will eat everything before it gets to us.

This need not be! We do have options and if we decide to make our choices known, we can make a difference. First, to our own well-being and hopefully, to the policies this country is now pursuing. But first, how it all started.

### THE PESTICIDES PARADIGM

This phase of raising foods freely with poisons commenced in 1966 with a new government policy on food production. The decision was heavily influenced by large global fertiliser companies and that saw great potential in the Indian agricultural market for their chemical fertiliser plants, pesticides and agricultural equipment. Unfortunately, there was no discussion about any other aspect of the policy except

that the new methods would help increase food production. No questions were asked about the impact of the new chemicals on the food itself or on human health or the natural environment.

### THE FIRST WARNINGS

In fact, serious studies that had already appeared by that time on the impact of chemical pesticides on living creatures were ignored. The first such study was Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* published in 1962 in the USA. She produced detailed evidence to prove that DDT damaged the reproductive systems of birds and mammals. *Silent Spring* became the precursor of the environment movement all over the world.

Several decades later, in 1996, *Our Stolen Future*, a book by Theo Colborn—another woman scientist—appeared. Colborn's book examined chemicals now called 'persistent pollutants' (POPs) which she found were playing havoc with human and biological reproductive (endocrine) systems across the planet. The use of DDT in agriculture was eventually banned and the international community also decided to set up a treaty to ban 12 of the worst POPs, called 'the dirty dozen'. But as their label declares, these poisons will persist in the environment for decades.

Despite all this evidence of the impact of chemicals on the human body, the wholesale reliance on chemicals to grow and treat plants has never been seriously questioned.

Ancient wisdom had developed highly skilled techniques for producing food, maintaining its diversity and balancing insects. But the introduction of artificial inputs—chemicals and pesticides produced by industrial means—changed all that. Year after year, the methods of modern agriculture have gotten more and more unnatural and their use is defended on the grounds that they are 'scientific' with no alternative.

Today, we have reached a stage where the soil in the field has been made sterile by repeated use of harsh chemicals. As



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a result, the soil is bereft of any natural organisms. The seed used in planting is chemically treated or genetically modified. The plant is subjected throughout its life to artificial nutrients and protected from attack by insects by dosing and spraying with extremely poisonous chemicals. As the plants are no longer allowed to develop resistance, the next crop requires use of even larger quantities of pesticides. Think of how weakened our health would be if we treated ourselves the same way we treat our plants, with endless medicines and artificial nutrients!

### WE NEED TO WATCH OUT FOR

**Foods that travel long distances.** The entry of industrial processors in the handling, distribution and sale of food is worrying. We have seen the arrival of a host of exotic and everyday fruits and vegetables from faraway countries. The need to transport food over great distances leads to a new invasion of a whole lot of dangerous chemicals in order to preserve the food for long journeys across oceans ('food miles'). After it has been 'processed', the food is again doused with chemicals or preservatives to keep even longer on super market shelves.

**Foods that have not reached maturity naturally.** Also to enable produce to travel long distance, farmers will take it down in raw condition, treat it with chemicals to resist storage insects, ripen it at destination with chemicals like calcium carbide before it reaches the consumer. So the final product that reaches us through supermarkets has very little connection with the place in which it was originally grown or with the way nature has designed them to be raised.

In some specific instances today safe food is almost impossible. For example, all chicken brought to the market is unnaturally raised. A bird that normally would have grown to maturity over 9-12 months is now forced to become an adult in five weeks. Such food can only be unhealthy because the poultry farmer is bound to use chemicals including artificial hormones for the purpose. So eat less of it, if it cannot be avoided.

**Foods that are highly processed.** Human bodies have not been equipped by nature to eat unnatural food or unnatu-

rally processed food or chemically contaminated food or chemicals. If we do so routinely, we cannot avoid their health consequences.

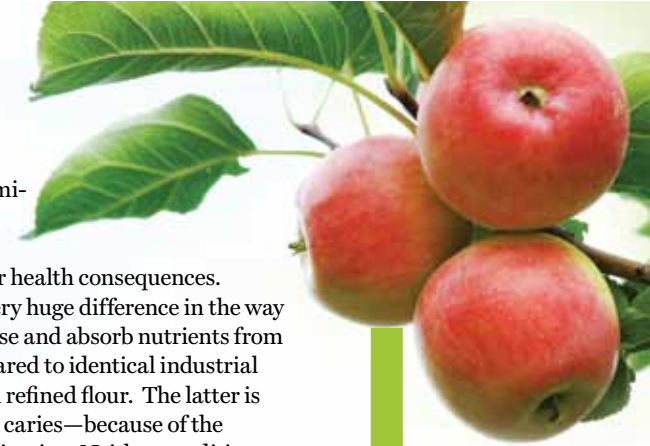
For example, there is a very huge difference in the way the body is able to metabolise and absorb nutrients from wholegrain products compared to identical industrial products like packaged and refined flour. The latter is intimately related to dental caries—because of the absence of fibre—and constipation. Neither conditions are associated with the consumption of wholewheat. There are a multitude of such examples.

**Foods that are highly refined.** Fortunately in India (and chiefly because of the cost) processed food is still limited to a small section of the population. But as there are newer products, the focus shifts to refined food now than ever before. As such foods are promoted as instant, magical solutions to fatigued individuals or growing children—they are bound to lead to more unhealthy consumption. There is no 'processed' or 'refined' food that will match the nutritional qualities of the same product in its unprocessed, natural form.

### LET'S CHOOSE NATURAL

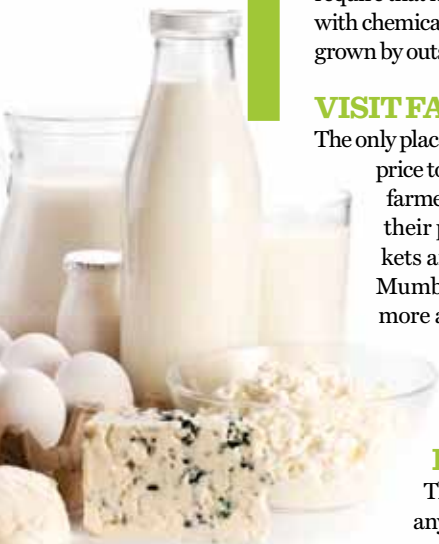
Yet, even today huge quantities of foods available in India are naturally grown and come from natural sources. Take, for example, mushrooms and mahua from the forest; fruits like jackfruit and mango. Much of the milk and meat still comes from animals and goats that browse open areas and consume naturally available fodder and leaves. Thus, by and large however it is still possible, if one is smart, to continue to eat food that comes from natural sources, untouched by chemicals.

And the good news is that there is a tremendous will to turn things around amongst a group of well-informed citizens. There is increasing awareness on clean foods and safe foods. Civil society associations and farmers associations have moved to promote a gradual return to organically or naturally grown food. In fact, there is already a large market developing within the country for organically grown food, reflected in the opening of more than 500 green shops in every major city and town.



Processed food in India is still limited to a small section of the population. But as there are newer products, the focus shifts to refined food now than never before.

Support farmers who grow organically. In any case, organic food is better food, so be ready to pay more for it, just as you do for other classes of goods.



## WHY ORGANIC IS MORE EXPENSIVE

Unfortunately, the encounter of modern consumers with organic produce is often soured by their price. Since organic farmers don't use expensive pesticides and chemical fertilisers, organically grown food ought to be cheaper than conventionally grown food. Here are two important considerations that have raised the price of organic produce.

First, land that has been used to grow crops with chemicals is devastated land. It has to be turned around and restored to health. Invariably, crops grown organically in such fields do not yield their best till 2-3 years. So to compensate for lower yields, costs may be higher. Once more and more farmers switch to organic and learn to grow food without chemicals, costs will come down. This is inevitable. You can be part of the process of bringing down prices. Support farmers who grow organically. In any case, organic food is better food, so be ready to pay more for it, just as you do for other classes of goods. If something is superior, you are always willing to pay more.

What's more, since organic food has to be kept separate from conventional food, transported to special shops in towns and cities, this also adds to the cost of the food. The regulations require that it cannot be mixed at any stage with food grown with chemicals. The crop must also be certified as organically grown by outside inspectors who charge immodest fees.

## VISIT FARMER'S MARKETS

The only place where organic food is sold more or less at an equal price to conventionally grown food is in green bazaars or farmer's markets where farmers bypass shops and bring their produce for direct sale to consumers. Such markets and *haats* are now fast developing in cities like Mumbai, Chennai, Mysore and Bangalore. Find out more about them and frequent them (*see next page*).

For those who don't have the facility of green bazaars, the only means of identifying organic produce is by its label.

## HOW TO SPOT 'ORGANIC'

There is a system in place which tries to ensure that any food sold as 'organic' must be certified as such

by government-recognised certification agencies. For example, there is Agmark Organic. Other certifiers include groups like Ecocert, IMO, Skal, NOCA, PGS. Their trade marks will invariably appear on packaged organic food items. Any packaged item (including mangoes and grapes) that claim to be 'organic' on the carton, but does not carry a certifier's label, will not be genuine.

## WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND

By and large, the following principles should be kept in mind while sourcing your food:

- **Eat seasonal.** You will solve much of your problems of sourcing safe food, if you depend largely on seasonally grown items. Don't insist on purchasing mangoes in December and oranges in June, or import them from faraway places. You must know that all fresh food decomposes rapidly over time and in high temperatures and must therefore be chemically treated.
- **Eat local.** Food grown locally is your best option, the closer the farm the fresher the food will be. Once you expose yourself to food imported to your market from faraway places, what you are doing is to expose yourself to food grown in unknown circumstances.
- **Eat Fresh.** The third principle is to always prefer fresh to processed. Processed food is natural food with its life removed because processing destroys the original structure of food and therefore its nutritional assets.
- **Eat your own.** The best solution is to raise your own food (vegetables, fruits) either in your garden, your balcony, your terrace, your backyard. Easier than you think!

These are four simple principles, but if rigorously followed (despite occasional splurges) they will ensure that you are eating safe food and preventing health damage most of the time.

Eat clean and organic and say hello to good health!

## \*ORGANIC MARKETS:

- **GREEN BAZAARS**, Green Hotel, Mysore (alternate Sundays) (08221-21010)
- **OPEN MARKET**, Khar, Mumbai (every Sunday) ([farmersmarket@kavitamukhi.com](mailto:farmersmarket@kavitamukhi.com))
- **ORGANIC LINK**, Aurangabad (0240-3293618)
- **ORGANIC BAZAARS**, Ooty and Coonoor ([www.greenshop@keystone-foundation.org](http://www.greenshop@keystone-foundation.org))



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# The Organic Shopping Guide

Every conceivable kind of organically grown food is now available in packaged form, with a 'certified organic' label. We have stores in the country selling every little provision required for keeping a kitchen well stocked with safe food. Online availability has made access to organic foods easier. We have websites ([www.restore.org.in](http://www.restore.org.in)) which generously share all kinds of recipes for every kind of food you need to cook—and also stock all the organically grown ingredients.

BUY IT RIGHT!

## Use this guide to make your kitchen cleaner and greener.

Authentic, certified organic food can be found in the following supermarkets, chains and stores which stocks most of the 10 major items: cereals and pulses, millets, veggies, fruits, edible oil, spices, condiments, sweeteners, beverages, eggs and milk.

### PAN INDIA

Spencers Retail stores:  
Sresthra brand  
FabIndia stores  
24 Letter Mantra  
([www.24lettermantra.com](http://www.24lettermantra.com))  
Khadi and Village Industries stores  
Godrej Nature's Basket

### SOUTH

Era Organics, Bengaluru  
([www.eraorganic.in](http://www.eraorganic.in))  
Jaivik Krushi Society,  
Lalbagh, Bengaluru  
(080-65624197,  
26577323)  
Restore, Chennai

([www.restore.org.in](http://www.restore.org.in))

Ahumcara, Chennai  
([www.ahumcara.com](http://www.ahumcara.com))

24 Letter Mantra,  
Hyderabad,  
([www.24lettermantra.com](http://www.24lettermantra.com))

Varkeys Retail, Kerala  
Bon Appetit, Puducherry  
([www.bonappetit.co.in](http://www.bonappetit.co.in))  
Elements, Calicut  
([www.elementsindia.net](http://www.elementsindia.net))

The Green Shop, Erode,  
Kerala, (09442233144)

### WEST

Navdanya, Mumbai  
([www.navdanya.org](http://www.navdanya.org))

### EAST

Sattvic Farms, Kolkata  
(+91-9830053601;  
+91-33-24495374)

### NORTH

Navdanya, New Delhi and  
Dehradun  
([www.navdanya.org](http://www.navdanya.org))  
Dubbengreen, New Delhi  
([www.organicbountry.com](http://www.organicbountry.com))

The Altitude Store, New  
Delhi  
([www.thealtitudestore.com](http://www.thealtitudestore.com))

Jaivik Haat, New Delhi  
([jaivikhaat@gmail.com](mailto:jaivikhaat@gmail.com))

## FOR MORE OPTIONS, try the following

### MILLET GRAINS AND PULSES

Timbaktu Collective, Anantapur ([www.timbaktu-organic.org](http://www.timbaktu-organic.org))  
Green Foundation, Bengaluru  
([www.greenconserve.com](http://www.greenconserve.com))  
Satvik ([satvik.india@gmail.com](mailto:satvik.india@gmail.com))  
Nesara, Mysore (08212330404)

### VEGGIES

They are a little more difficult to get because a) They cannot really be packaged unless refrigerated and b) They tend to get dehydrated and decompose. New Era Organics in

Bengaluru, for instance, stocks vegetables and fruits. So does the green market run by the NGO IIRD, in Ahmedabad. There is a regular green market in Chennai which offers only organic vegetables, sold directly by organic farmers.

Organic Hut, Anand-Sojitra Road, Gujarat (02692-281664)  
Green Essentials, Panaji, Goa ([www.greenessentials.in](http://www.greenessentials.in))  
Savayava Siri, Bengaluru (09900961131)  
Jatan, Vadodara (0265-2371429)  
Asal, Ahmedabad



([www.asalworld.org](http://www.asalworld.org))  
Aryasanskriti, Ahmedabad  
(07955221111)

### FRUITS

Although some traders now market fruit cartons marked 'organic', these are fake. Ensure the box has a label from one of the following certification agencies: NOCA, PGS, IMO, ECOCERT, SKAI, SGS.

Oasis shop, Vadodara  
([www.oasiswebsites.com](http://www.oasiswebsites.com))

### BEVERAGES

Teas and coffees are now routinely available from organically grown gardens. Many stores also keep syrups, soups and other beverages made from organically grown material.

Organic India  
([www.organicindia.com](http://www.organicindia.com))  
Rainforest Retreat  
([www.rainforestours.com](http://www.rainforestours.com))

### SPICES

Easily available in most organic stores—organic spices are always the best because they store longer, have stronger fragrance, and often come at the same price as conventionally grown ones.

Eklaya, Surat  
([www.eklaya.com](http://www.eklaya.com))  
Green Channel, Bengaluru  
([greenchannelbangalore@gmail.com](mailto:greenchannelbangalore@gmail.com))

PDS, Idukki, Kerala  
([www.pds-organicspice.com](http://www.pds-organicspice.com))  
Keystone Foundation's green shops  
([www.greenshop@keystone-foundation.org](http://www.greenshop@keystone-foundation.org))

### EDIBLE OILS

Most available oils in the market tend to be industrially processed. Cold-pressed oils (oils from ghanis) are once again making a comeback to the market. Patanjali Yogpeeth has recently started mustard oil production, which is extremely good. Patanjali Yogpeeth, Haridwar  
([www.diviyayoga.com](http://www.diviyayoga.com))  
Dharani, Anantapur  
([www.timbaktu-organic.org](http://www.timbaktu-organic.org))

### SWEETENERS

Jaggery is making a comeback since white sugar is harmful. Alternative sweeteners are easily available in most green stores. Altermedia, Trissur, Kerala (0487422974)  
Keystone Foundation's green shops, Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu, ([www](http://www).

[greenshop@keystone-foundation.org](mailto:greenshop@keystone-foundation.org))

### CONDIMENTS

For condiments like salt, pepper, mustard, olive oil and vinegar, you can look at stores like: Kudubam, Trichy  
([kudumbamtry@eth.net](mailto:kudumbamtry@eth.net))

### DAIRY & POULTRY

Herbal eggs come from only one source, Kansal farms in Haryana while organic milk is found in Gloria Farms in Puducherry. However, the best organic milk is obtained from desi cows or from local milkmen. Easy Day stores, New Delhi for herbal eggs  
Kansal & Kansal Agro Farms, Haryana (01802659026)  
Gloria Farms, Puducherry  
Madhyanchal Organic Farmers Association ([info@iofa.org.in](mailto:info@iofa.org.in))  
Organic India, Lucknow, ([www.organicindia.com](http://www.organicindia.com))

(For state-wise listing of organic stores and contact information, visit: [www.ofai.org](http://www.ofai.org))

— By Claude Alvares

Any food sold as organic should be certified as such by government-recognised certification agencies.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GULSHAN SACHDEVA