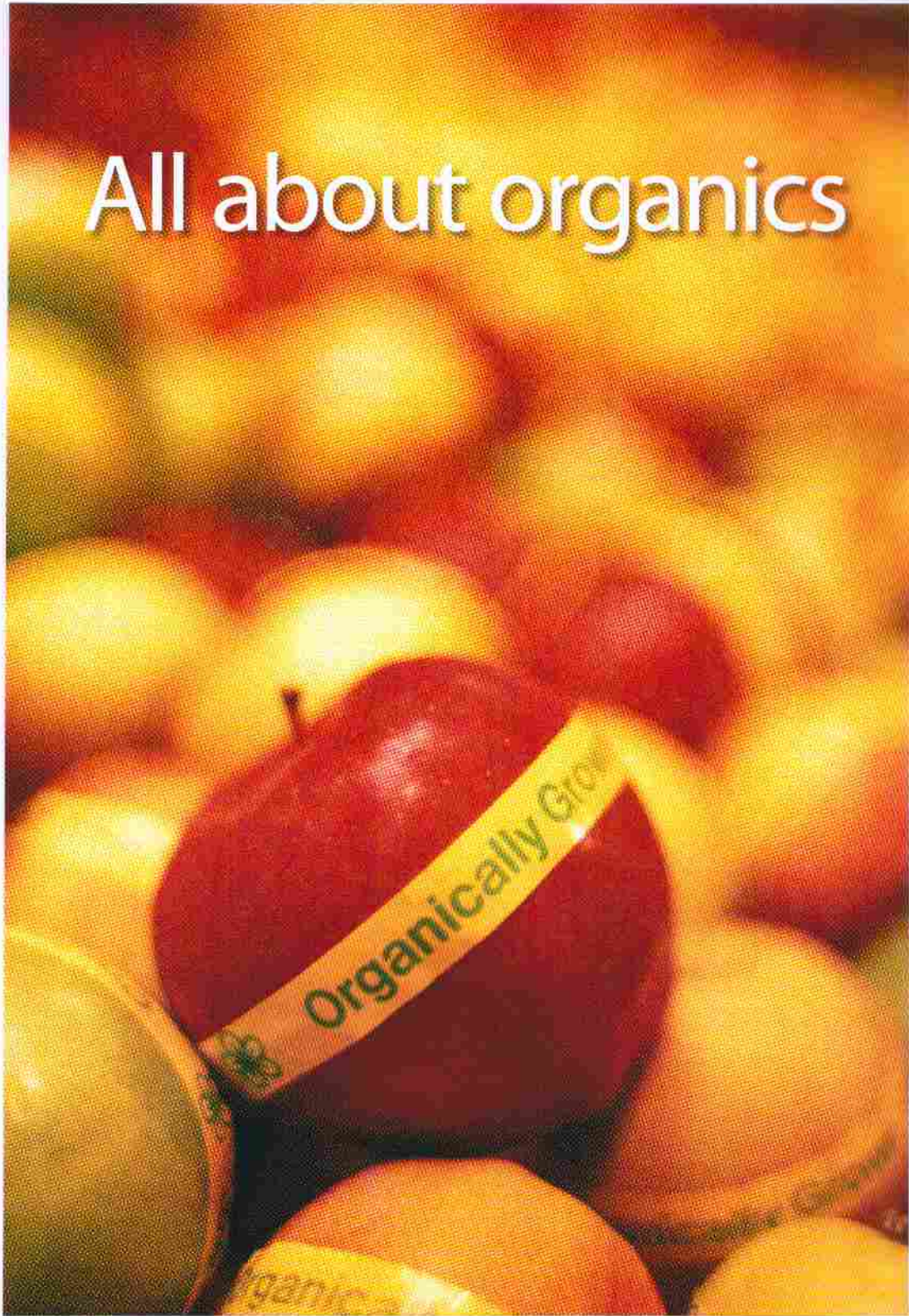


All about organics



Once relegated to health-food shops and farmers' markets, organic food is showing up on supermarket shelves, writes **JULIA NEKICH**.

With Australians becoming increasingly health conscious, it's no wonder organic foods have entered the mainstream food industry so rapidly in recent years. The organic industry in Australia is now estimated to be worth \$400 million in retail sales, and growing at a rate of 25 per cent per annum.

At the grassroots level, the number of organic producers, including those 'in conversion', grew from 1600 to 2000 between 2000 and 2004.¹ In the same period, organic farming areas grew from 7.6 million to 12.5 million hectares.¹ Fruit and nuts make up the largest part of the industry (40 per cent), followed by vegetables (32 per cent), then beef (22 per cent) and cereals (14 per cent).²

WHY ORGANIC?

Health and environmental benefits are just two reasons why Australians are turning to organic foods. Take pesticides, for instance. Conventional farming and food production use synthetic chemicals (which are individually tested and monitored). Organic food is grown and produced without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, radiation, genetically modified (GM) components, and artificial chemicals.

"Organic foods aren't pesticide free," says Shane Heaton, a nutritionist at Biological Farmers of Australia, an organisation that represents the industry and promotes organic-certification

requirements. "There are seven naturally occurring pesticides that organic farmers can use, and there are restrictions on how they use them."

Environmental sustainability is also essential in organic farming. Excessive use of synthetic chemicals reduces soil fertility and increases soil salinity. On the other hand, "natural pesticides break down quickly and don't persist in the environment," Heaton says.

In the production of organic animal produce, animal welfare is vital. Feed lots, cages, antibiotics, steroids and hormones aren't used.

Many health experts and studies declare there are no significant differences in key vitamins and minerals between organic and conventional foods. But André Leu, chairman of the Organic Federation of Australia, says studies do show differences in phytonutrient and antioxidant levels. Some studies suggest that synthetic chemicals reduce a plant's production of these important elements, which have a role in the prevention and reduction (even reversal) of degenerative diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

"Organic food has higher levels of antioxidants and phytonutrients – up to 30 per cent, depending on the food. Some studies have also shown organics can contain up to 30 per cent more micronutrients than conventional foods," says Leu.

¹Organic Annual Report 2004, Biological Farmers Australia. ²The Australian Organic Industry: A Summary, Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2004.

THE TASTE TEST

"Another major reason people are buying organic is because they believe it tastes better. There is some evidence to suggest that this might be true. Higher levels of phytonutrients are linked to high levels of phenolics and flavonoids, which help determine the taste and smell of foods," Leu says.

For consumers, there is an economic downside to organics. "The price of organic foods is prohibitive, as people are generally on a tight budget," says Dr Claire Collins, senior lecturer in nutrition and dietetics at the University of Newcastle and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia. Organic farming and food production is more labour intensive, raising the price of the end product by up to 70 per cent more than its conventional equivalent.

Heaton says consumers can look at re-prioritising. "According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, we spend more on alcohol and junk food than on fruit and vegetables." If price is an issue, he advises doing the best you can. "Don't think it has to be 'all or nothing'. If you're going to choose some organic foods, go for fresh produce that you would eat raw. Water doesn't wash pesticides off well, because they're designed to stick to the plant in rain, whereas cooking degrades pesticides more."

He says animal products, particularly meat, are also best eaten organic. "High levels of pesticides are found in fatty animal foods, because pesticides accumulate around nerves, which are surrounded by fat."



THE BEST CHOICE

According to Dr Collins, if you're looking for maximum nutrients and flavour, and are on a tight budget, go for what's in season – particularly 'farm fresh' produce. "If you want to retain as many nutrients as possible, consider the way you cook your vegetables. Use minimal water and the shortest cooking time. If you buy organic, and then boil the guts out of it, there's no difference in the nutritional value," she says.

According to Heaton, the move to organics is good news, and not just in terms of health benefits. "People have lost a connection with farmers, with where their food comes from. 'Organic' gives a clear statement of what's going on with their food."

"There's a clear distinction between certified and uncertified organic food, so look for the Australian Certified Organic label," he says, adding that the use of the word 'organic' isn't regulated. The organic certification system ensures 'certified organic' farms and producers adhere to strict standards, and regular audits and spot checks are carried out by independent assessors. A farm is certified organic only after it has used organic management for three years. ❁