



Jonathan House Emerald

For produce to be certified 'organic' in Oregon, no prohibited fertilizers or herbicides may be used in soil or on plants during their growth and processing. In addition to Oregon Tilth's certification, the USDA is responsible for accrediting organic food nationally.

## Certified organic deemed 'better' than conventional

■ Although organic foods can cost more, they provide a suitable option to those looking to eat chemical free

By Caron Alarab  
for the Emerald

Lactose-free herbed cheese with eggs from vegetarian hens on sprouted wheat tortillas, raw carrot juice and vanilla soy milk on rice puffs — maybe not the typical breakfast of champions, but a verifiable option for those who prefer food devoid of hormones and pesticides. Each of these products is certified and labeled as "organic."

From red wine to pretzel nuggets, it seems almost any product has an organic counterpart on the market today. However, for those who are not already hip to the health store scene, it may be difficult to determine just what the word "organic" means or how certain products become "certified" while others do not.

Oregon Tilth Inc., a nonprofit research and education organization based in Salem, has been certifying organic farmers, processors, retailers and handlers throughout Oregon, the United States and internationally since 1974.

According to Oregon's Revisited Statutes of 1995, posted on the OTI Web site, "organic" means a variety of things. When it comes to agriculture, no prohibited fertilizers may be used in soils and greenhouse conditions, and chemicals including herbicides and growth regulators are prohibited during growing and processing.

As for any "organically grown," or raised, animals, no prohibited drugs or antibiotics may be introduced to the animals, feed and pastures must be in accordance with national standards and no prohibited hormones or insecticides may be added to feed.

The Web site also states that in order to receive the Oregon Tilth Certified Organic label, "verifiable third party inspections and legally binding affidavits" must accompany the fulfillment of these standards. In the case of packaging, all

ingredients must be included on the label and only certain terms may be used, such as "organic," "organically grown," or "certified organic," as opposed to "wild" or "biologically grown."

Executive Director of Oregon Tilth Inc. Peter Gonzalves said the United States Department of Agriculture is responsible for accrediting certifiers and comes in annually to enforce the National Organic Program, just fully implemented in October. The program is a result of a series of adjustments made to national rules and regulations in regards to organically certified prod-

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owner and co-founder,  
The Kiva

ucts across the United States, Gonzalves said.

Because of this program, USDA regulates proper certification and prosecutes companies and vendors that put out misleading advertisements and labels that use "organic" or other terms when not properly certified, Gonzalves said. This level of certification, however, doesn't always come at a low cost, which may be the reason some producers and farmers either risk liability through invalid labeling or choose not to farm organically at all, he said.

The Oregon Farm Bureau, also based in Salem, is the state's largest nonpartisan, nonprofit general agricultural organization, composed of about 22,000 Oregon families and professional staff. According to the OFB Web site, the organization strives to find "positive solutions to challenges facing today's family farmers and ranchers."

Jean Wilkinson is the associate director of governmental affairs

and assistant general counsel for OFB. Part owner in a family wheat and cattle operation east of the Cascades, Wilkinson said she has no real preference for organic foods, and only some of the OFB members are organic farmers.

"(Organic foods) are generally more expensive, and I am confident our foods are safe," she said. "From a farmer's perspective, certification may be an added cost that ultimately makes the industry less desirable — but this is a policy issue that needs to be sorted out between farmers and consumers."

A key player in the relationship between farmers and consumers is the vendor. George Brown is the owner and co-founder of The Kiva, a local health store and bookstore in Eugene that was established almost 32 years ago. Located at 125 W. 11th Ave., the store provides a wide variety of foods and beverages, close to a third of which are certified organic. Brown has an optimistic outlook on the future of organic produce and products because of how competitive the market has gotten over the years, he said.

"Price is becoming much less of an issue," Brown said. "We've found organic food isn't always more expensive. In some cases, it's even cheaper."

However, he also sees the customers who don't find a problem with the occasionally high prices of organic products.

"Some people are willing to pay more," he said.

Gonzalves described two main things he considers in buying organic products as an employee of Oregon Tilth.

"It's the same thing I hear from others: 'Conventional food is edible and organic food is better.' However, I also support Oregon's organic farmers through buying their products," Gonzalves said. "So it's a bit of each."

For more information regarding certification of organic products and the full definition of "organic," visit [www.tilth.org](http://www.tilth.org).

Caron Alarab is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.



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