

Organic vs. Non-Organic by Tania Messina

In today's world of agribusiness, factory farms, excessive obesity and rampant disease, I am at the same time amused and outraged at the ongoing debate on the pros and cons of organic vs. non-organic food. I can't help but wonder what on earth has happened to plain old common sense. Could it be that society over several generations has been so indoctrinated by the conglomerates that control everything from our food and medicine to the debacle that brought down Wall Street that we can no longer think for ourselves? Do we take time to think about what food really is, and especially what it was before insidious synthetic chemical compounds invaded our food supply? Plain and simple, our bodies were made to function very well on a variety of foods in their natural state; our bodies were not made to ingest man-made chemicals, period. Everyday we see the repercussions of what happens when these substances enter our bodies, cancer being the most pernicious plague of our times. Before the infiltration of chemicals into our food supply, there was no such ridiculous debate, food was food fertilized with compost and manure on the farm. Let's be honest, there's no denying that it was tough going; anyone who has ever grown vegetables in the backyard has horror stories about killer bugs and inclement weather devastating a garden overnight. No wonder that chemicals became the answer to the farmer's nightmare, but what at first entered slowly and quietly, soon became the nightmare itself devastating so much in its wake that now we're dealing with an imbalanced planet while we attempt to bring it back into balance.

Recently, I was shopping at a favorite market where I had discovered a reasonably priced organic wine that had the extra bonus of not having sulfites added to the wine. This is another one of those ongoing debates. Wine store proprietors don't like to talk about it, because over 99% of their bottles have sulfites added. They slough off the controversy saying that the minute amount is inconsequential, especially since wine contains naturally occurring sulfites, while the other side of the debate argues that there is a difference between a chemical additive and a natural by-product. Unsuccessful in finding the wine, I asked a helpful employee with whom I had spoken many times before. While helping me search for it, she remarked with certainty that additive-free wines were obviously the wave of the future, because, for instance, this food market couldn't keep up with the demand. As our conversation went on to encompass the whole gamut of chemical additives to foods, the common interest we had found was abruptly interrupted by another employee opening boxes of wine.

"Interesting that we're afraid of chemicals when our bodies are composed of chemicals," he remarked snidely, looking away from us while continuing his work.

Knowing that he was out of place, the young woman looked embarrassed, and I surprised myself when I responded so quickly, "But I'd rather it be Mother Nature's chemicals than those produced synthetically in a laboratory by a chemical company for profit at my expense."

With no response, he only smiled squeamishly while I, driving home without my wine because it was out by popular demand, wondered incredulously what it is about human nature that so often causes us to actually work against our own self-interest. It was the biologist Rachel Carson who, in her 1962 ground breaking book, *Silent Spring*, exposed the deadly hazards of the pesticide,

DDT, and it was her prophetic words on a CBS documentary about *Silent Spring* that seem even more relevant today than they were 45 years ago shortly before her death from breast cancer in 1964. “Man’s attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.” Working against our own self-interest? While the addition of sulfites to wine may not be the most pressing issue at stake today, the point is, why must everything we ingest be tampered with? Indeed, Michael Pollan, in his highly thought provoking recent book, *In Defense of Food*, acknowledges the fact that food in our country is driven by a thirty-two billion-dollar marketing machine. He goes on to say that “By the 1960s or so it had become all but impossible to sustain traditional ways of eating on the face of the industrialization of our food. If you wanted to eat produce grown without synthetic chemicals or meat raised on pasture without pharmaceuticals, you were out of luck.” Now we can surely hear Rachel Carson’s prophetic words as Pollan emphasizes “.....the chronic diseases that now kill most of us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food: the rise of highly processed foods and refined grains; the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in huge monocultures; the superabundance of cheap calories of sugar and fat produced by modern agriculture.....”

The literature extolling the virtues of Europeans, particularly the French and Italians, loving their food and yet not becoming obese (certainly not in the epidemic proportions that we see surrounding us every day in the U.S.) is abundant, and one who has good firsthand knowledge of this is Peter Mayle, author of the delightful *A Year In Provence*. With a hiatus of four years on Long Island after having lived in Provence for years, Mayle, an Englishman, decided, with his wife, to return to the joys of life in the south of France. Following then with another book, *Encore Provence*, he describes the “.....irritatingly slimmer than they have any right to be.....” French considering their “.....national passion for good food.” He tells us, “The French don’t snack.” Then he goes on to say, “Compare that with the public eating and drinking that goes on in America: pizza, hot dogs, nachos, tacos, heroes, potato chips, sandwiches, huge containers of coffee, half-gallon buckets of Coke (Diet, of course), and heaven knows what else being demolished on the hoof, often on the way to the aerobics class.” And now comes his coupe de grâce. “I believe, without a shred of scientific proof, that the raw ingredients here [France] contain fewer additives, preservatives, colorants, and chemical novelties than in the States.” Considering this, it is particularly interesting that Rachel Carson describes in *Silent Spring* how DDT accumulates in fatty tissue, causes genetic damage and cancer. It seems that here our common sense should automatically click in to tell us that the purer the food and the closer to its natural origins, the better for our bodies and, therefore, our well-being. It is true that DDT was finally banned, but not until much damage had been done, and it was then exported for use in what were then known as “third world” countries! But, it seems reasonable to assume that while we may not have to worry about the specific use of DDT on our food supply any longer, that the use of chemicals, be they a bit less dangerous than DDT, probably still have a cumulative deleterious effect on us. While there have been numerous articles and books written on this subject, and while many shoppers read labels and buy organic in hopes of avoiding as many synthetic substances as possible, there are always those who argue that the research supporting organic food is inconclusive. That simply depends on the literature one chooses to read. Opening our minds and focusing on a preventive approach generally leads to reading the myriad of material devoted to wellness rather than to illness, and thereby helping to keep disease at bay,

rather than consuming products with no thought given to their content and safety, which often leads to degenerative disease and worse. As the battle rages on between the pros and the cons of food safety, we owe it to ourselves to choose rather than to wait for years of research, which, unfortunately is often funded by companies with their own interest at stake. At the end of the day, I, for one, like knowing that the pot of vegetable soup I made contains as many of the life giving properties as possible that are inherent to various vegetables rather than a witch's brew of mysterious synthetic substances that are ultimately responsible for innumerable health problems.

A case in point is the recent resurgence of the questionable product, high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), which was reported by The Washington Post, January 28, 2009, to contain mercury. According to the Post, "HFCS has replaced sugar as the sweetener in many beverages and foods such as breads, cereals, breakfast bars, lunch meats, yogurts, soups and condiments. On average, Americans consume about 12 teaspoons per day of HFCS, but teens and other high consumers can take in 80 percent more HFCS than average." It is no secret that the heavy metal, mercury, is a neurotoxin that increases the risk of many health problems including memory loss and mood swings among others. Memory loss? As in, perhaps, Alzheimer's? Mood swings? As in, perhaps, teens who especially consume high quantities of soft drinks? Yes, soft drinks, which are sweetened with HFCS, in fact, a two-liter soft drink bottle can contain as much as 15 ounces of HFCS. Not surprisingly, the Corn Refiners Association has debunked this latest mercury finding. So, shall we wait for researchers on both sides of the question to argue over their findings, or make our own decisions? Even some of the giants in the food industry aren't waiting. According to The New York Times, March 21, 2009, "From the tomato sauce on a Pizza Hut pie called "The Natural," to the just-released soda Pepsi Natural, some of the biggest players in the American food business have started, in the last few months, replacing high-fructose corn syrup with old-fashioned sugar." What a surprise for those of us who diligently scrutinize labels and attempt to avoid sugar as much as possible, but obviously it is still a safer bet than HFCS.

Now, while we're at it, let's really add insult to injury. For the consumer who did his or her homework and discovered the ill effects of sugar or HFCS in soft drinks, therefore switching to diet sodas, there seems to be another price we have to pay. If a product boasts being "sugar free," it helps to read the ingredients label so as to be aware of just what it is we're ingesting. Again, a personal experience with only a small amount of research resulted in another unexpected jolt. Periodically buying lozenges, which help to alleviate a dry throat in a desert climate, it dawned on me that there was one ingredient of which I was unaware listed on the bag denoting that the contents were sugar free. The ingredient sounded harmless enough while the bag suggested all the positive aspects of a sunny alpine meadow. Suddenly, the word with which I was unfamiliar, aspartame, started popping up everywhere. Dr. Andrew Weil, in his book, *Natural Health, Natural Medicine*, warns generally against the use of artificial sweeteners and addresses aspartame in particular. "More worrisome than preservatives are artificial sweeteners. Saccharin, a known carcinogen, should be avoided. Cyclamates, banned some years ago for suspected carcinogenicity, are now being reconsidered for use in food." He continues,

"Recently aspartame (NutraSweet) has become enormously popular. The manufacturer portrays it as a gift from nature, but, although the two component amino acids occur in nature, aspartame itself does not. Like all

artificial sweeteners, aspartame has a peculiar taste. Because I have seen a number of patients, mostly women, who report headaches from this substance, I don't regard it as free from toxicity. Women also find that aspartame aggravated PMS. I think you are better off using moderate amounts of sugar than consuming any artificial sweeteners on a regular basis."

Weil's well-made point about aspartame not occurring in nature strikes a familiar note, much like naturally occurring sulfites as opposed to the chemical additive. Increasingly we are reminded to stay as close as possible in our diets to the natural food chain for optimum health; it's no wonder that more and more consumers diligently read labels. When I returned the bag of lozenges to the market, the manager, unsurprised, asked if it was because of the aspartame. When I responded in the positive, he conceded that there had been a lot of returns. And yet the product continues to sit on their shelves, and I wonder *is ignorance really bliss?* Perhaps it is; after all, it takes time and perseverance to stay informed, especially when the menace most often tends to be a tiny hidden ingredient, and therefore not thought to be particularly dangerous. However, as the old adage of the barking dog reminds us, it's not the obvious we have to fear so much as the sneaky, quiet one that suddenly attacks without warning. Fortunately, the quick bite in nature can generally be dealt with in a speedy manner. Unfortunately, the cumulative effects of all those often cryptic ingredients in our food supply can have a gradual destructive effect on our health. We are constantly reminded of the direct connection of lifestyle diseases such as allergies, asthma, heart disease and cancer to unhealthy diets. And, those unhealthy diets, whether they are composed of less expensive fast food or more costly fare, but nevertheless produced with the use of synthetic substances, be they pesticides, preservatives, hormones or antibiotics, still add up to problems for society as a whole. As Michael Pollan so aptly puts it in his book, *In Defense of Food*, "But though fast food may be good business for the health care industry, the cost to society---an estimated \$250 billion a year in diet-related health care costs and rising rapidly- cannot be sustained indefinitely."

We've been hearing a lot lately about billions and trillions, numbers that fly right past us, because in reality they are incomprehensible in their enormity. But, I couldn't help thinking about our thirty-two billion-dollar food marketing machine and its possible relationship to our diet-related health care costs estimated at \$250 billion a year. Where does it all end? It would be nice if the conglomerates dealing with our food supply could turn away from the negative impact they've had on society to a positive approach focused on health, which would ultimately lead to a healthier planet. It is possible; some have done it successfully, but until this happens on a larger scale, we simply have to take the action into our own hands. Just a little bit of knowledge each day can go a long way to making us healthier, feeling stronger and, most importantly, knowing that we're not being manipulated by big business.

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