

# Eat your words

by Sabine Eiche

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Store flyers are guilty of recycling words when describing products – extreme, chosen, superior, unique, ultimate, all these and more have lost their brilliance, they're now dull from overuse.

Sooner or later we stop registering words that are continually repeated. Our inattentiveness can mislead us when we make choices about food. Flyers, stores, labels and brand names flog food as wholesome, genuine, healthy, local, natural, pure, select – words that sound vaguely reassuring if we're concerned about what we eat. And unless we're alert, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that such terms guarantee the food's safety and nutritional value. It's just a step away from assuming they're organic, a word increasingly heard and seen.

But what exactly does organic mean when referring to food and farming? When did it all start? And is it as good as it sounds?

Organic farming is the way farmers farmed before synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers were developed – in short, before the advent of farming and food production on an industrialized scale in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Up to then, farms were relatively small and diversified, raising a variety of crops and livestock. Today most farms are specialized, dealing with one type of crop or livestock on a massive scale. We currently use the term organic farm to refer to those striving for ecological balance and biodiversity, goals not shared by the giants of the agri-food business who prefer the mega monoculture farm.

The phrase organic farming (as opposed to chemical farming) can be traced to the book *Look to the Land*, published 1940 by the British agriculturist Lord Northbourne, who believed the farm must be a living entity, with a balanced organic life regulated by

nature, not chemistry. His principles were taken up in the USA in 1945 by Jerome Rodale. They received a decisive boost in 1962, through Rachel Carson's book *The Silent Spring*, which led to the banning of DDT spraying in 1972.

Finally, in 2002, the US Department of Agriculture turned regulations for the organic industry into law, though Canada's "Organic Regulations" weren't enforced until June 30, 2009. Other countries as well have laws establishing organic standards for food production. All are slightly different and subject to frequent modification.

In Canada, if the organic content of a product is 95 per cent or higher, it's certified organic and may use the "Canada Organic" logo. Multi-ingredient products with 70-95 per cent organic content may declare the percentage of the organic ingredients but may not use the logo.

When the US regulations were passed in 2002, the non-organic ingredients accepted for organic food products totalled 77; by 2012 the number had risen to 250. 'Big Food' corporations muscling into the organic food business are changing things. Thus pursued by 'Big Food', will organic end up as just another misleading buzz word?

No manufactured food products – organic or conventional – for me, thanks. I'll stick to basic food, to the raw ingredients, either grown in my own garden or bought at local farmers' markets and the farmgate, raised according to the principles of ecological balance and biodiversity.