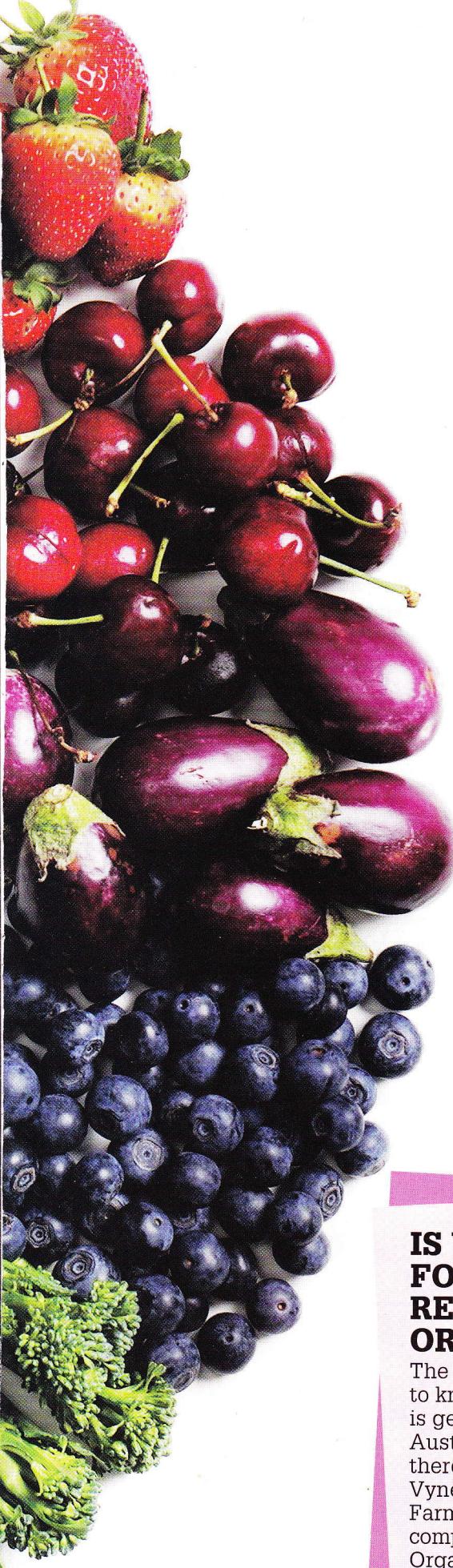


THE SAVVY GIRL'S GUIDE

TO BUYING
organic

Learn to spot dodgy labels and
save precious money in the
organic aisle at the supermarket



In a perfect world, we'd eat a diet of clean, fresh organic food grown by the farmer we shook hands with at the farmers market, and do our weekly shop at the organic grocers. Unfortunately, few of us can afford to buy organics all the time, and even if we could, how can we be sure it really is certified organic?

Thankfully, the Australian Certified Organic Standard is helping ensure the organic food you buy is the real deal. Sure, it hasn't brought the prices down, but there are some tricks you can use to save money on everyday organic must-haves. Read on to find out how.

Why is ORGANIC better?

According to Sara McMillan from the Australian Conservation Foundation, organic food production is smarter. "It relies on ecological processes and works with the earth rather than against it. Organic agriculture sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people," she explains.

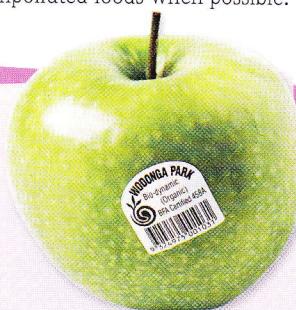
In the past two years, Australia's demand for organic produce has dramatically increased. According to a report released by the Biological Farmers of Australia, more than 60 per cent of households now buy organic groceries, up from 40 per cent three years ago. Sales of organic eggs are up 75 per cent and milk and other dairy products have increased by 36 per cent.

They put the trend down to an increased awareness of the way in which our food and product choices affect our health, the environment and animal welfare.

"The way we live today, our bodies are already carrying a huge toxic burden," says Emma Sgourakis from The Nutrition Coach (thenutritioncoach.com.au). "Our livers are processing all these toxins, so it's important to choose clean, unpolluted foods when possible."

IS YOUR FOOD REALLY ORGANIC?

The easiest way to know if a food is genuine organic is to look for the Australian Certified Organic logo. "If there is no logo, put it back," says Holly Vyner, general manager of Biological Farmers of Australia, the parent company of Australian Certified Organic. Beware baseless marketing terms like "natural" and "green".



LABELS THAT ARE THE REAL DEAL

Under the terms of the Australian Certified Organic Standard, food manufacturers are permitted to use certain terms only if they adhere to very particular regulations. Commit these labels to memory and you'll always be able to tell what you are buying.

Standard: Unlabelled Products that contain less than 70 per cent organic ingredients may not use the term "organic" on the front or back label. However, the ingredient list can describe any individual ingredient that is organic as being so.

Good: Made with organic ingredients

At least 70 per cent of all the ingredients in the product must be created from organic production methods, and the remaining ingredients must be clearly listed as such on the label.

Better: Organic At least 95 per cent of all the ingredients in the product (excluding salt and water) must be created from organic production methods, and any remaining ingredients must be on the list of approved substances, for example, plant ingredients treated with some biological (naturally occurring, not chemical) pesticides.

Best: 100 per cent organic All of the ingredients in the product (excluding salt and water) must be created from organic production methods. For example, they must be farmed without the use of chemicals and without damaging surrounding biodiversity. ►



WHAT IS ORGANIC MEAT AND DAIRY?

While the differences between organic and non-organic fruit and vegetables is largely about the use of chemicals, the differences in organic meat and dairy have to do with how the animals are raised and what they are fed.



Red meat To meet the national organic standard, animals must be raised with access to pasture and organic feed for their entire life. Feed lot production (non-organic) is what you want to avoid, because the feed can be full of artificial supplements, growth promoters and hormones, all of which result in the meat containing high levels of saturated fat. The meat must also be processed at a certified organic abattoir and butcher.



Poultry and eggs The hens reared for organic meat must not have been raised in battery cages or been fed antibiotics (the use of hormones has not been permitted in Australia since 1967). Their feed must be no less than 95 per cent organic and the birds allowed to roam free on organic land. De-beaking, a practice that allows chickens to live in close confines and not harm each other, is also disallowed.



Dairy products To receive organic certification, dairy products must adhere to the same conditions that apply to red meat – the animals must be raised with access to pasture and organic feed for the duration of their life. Also, if antibiotics are administered to the animal for welfare reasons, the milk from that cow cannot be labelled or sold as organic for six months.



Fish "You can't buy organic fish because they all come from the same interconnected rivers and oceans," explains Sgourakis. Her advice? "You should stick with smaller varieties. Larger species like tuna and swordfish contain higher levels of mercury."

How to avoid GM FOODS

According to the Biological Farmers of Australia, avoiding genetically modified (GM) food is one of the top reasons consumers choose organic. Crops that have been genetically modified have had their DNA altered to make them stronger and more resistant to pests and disease, yielding greater crops, better-looking food and lower prices for consumers. On the flip side, there is widespread concern GM crops can cause damage to the environment, result in a loss of biodiversity and lead to the evolution of mutated plant, pest and animal species.

Currently there is no law requiring ingredients that are GM to be specified as such on the label, and if you're eating food that contains soy, corn or potatoes, chances are you're being exposed to GM foods. The only way to avoid them is to buy Australian Certified Organic products, which cannot contain GM ingredients.

Saving money ON ORGANICS

Getting the most organic bang for your supermarket buck is essentially a case of knowing what to buy and when to buy it.

1 Spend on some foods, save on others

Given that most of us have a limited grocery budget, it's important to spend our cash on products that are going to make a difference. America's Environmental Working Group (EWG) conducted a study to uncover which foods retain chemicals used in agriculture, and have recently updated their shortlist of what they call "The Clean 15" – fruits and vegetables that were found to be very low in pesticides – and "The Dirty Dozen", those shown to have potentially dangerous levels

of pesticide residue. These heavily polluted food products are the ones that are essential to buy organic – it really is worth spending that little bit of extra money.

"Some fruits, such as strawberries, blueberries, tomatoes and grapes, have thinner skins and can absorb pesticides more easily," agrees Sgourakis. "I try to buy these types of fruits organic."

Spend up on green leafy veggies like celery, spinach and lettuce too. "Pesticide residue is found to be highest on celery, so I always buy this organic," Sgourakis adds.

Based on the EWG's findings, we've compiled a list of the foods you should always try to buy organic, those to buy if you can spare the extra cash and the fruit and vegetables you can save your money on.

Essential organic

Fruit: apples, blueberries, cherries, grapes, nectarines, peaches, strawberries.

Veggies: capsicum, celery, kale, lettuce, potatoes, spinach, tomatoes.

Other: butter, chicken, rolled oats.

Not-so-essential organic

Fruit: grapefruit, honeydew melon, kiwifruit, mango, pineapple, rockmelon, watermelon.

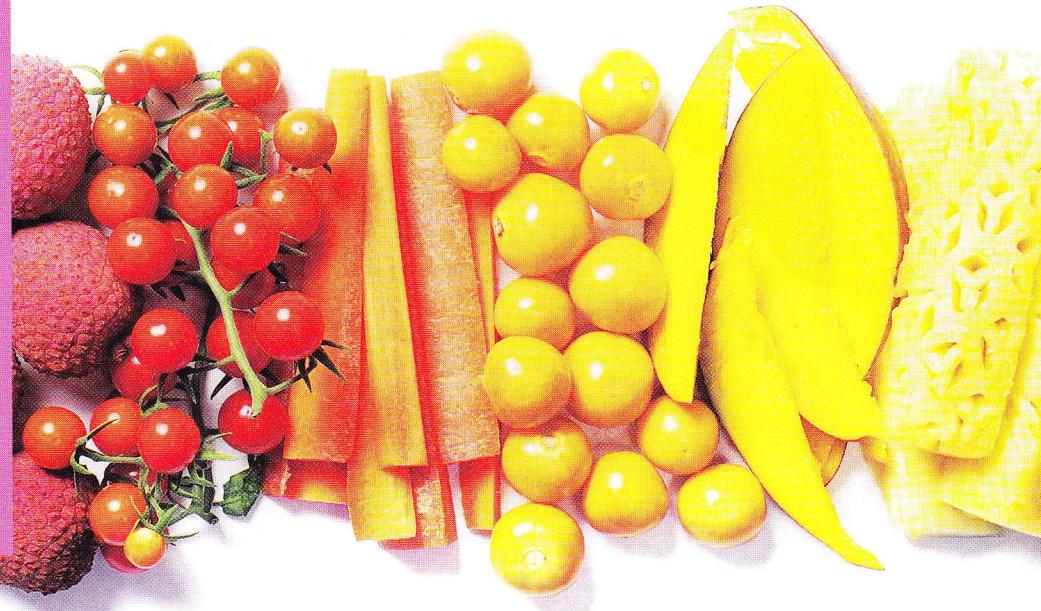
Veggies: avocado, asparagus, cabbage, corn, eggplant, onion, peas, sweet potato.

If you have the cash

Other: grass-fed meat, goat's cheese, dark chocolate (70 per cent cocoa), herbs, plain yoghurt, spelt pasta, full-fat milk.

2 Buy in season and save more again

Organic farming is in tune with what grows at different times of the year – and prices reflect this. "Produce that's in season tends to be a lot cheaper," says Sgourakis. "Less resources are required to grow them and the supply is greater. I also believe seasonal food is better for your body because you are delivering what it needs at particular times of the year."



3 Buy locally or join an organic co-op

The quicker food gets from the paddock to your plate, the fewer preservatives it needs, so if possible, buy food grown in your area. To save, join a co-op that bulk orders food – less packaging and you only buy what you need.

4 Visit weekend farmers markets

Forget the bar or cafe – why not meet up with your friends at one of the many farmers markets that take place every weekend? “A regular catch-up with your girlfriends at a farmers market is so much more enjoyable than pushing a trolley around a supermarket,” says Sgourakis. Find a market near you at farmersmarkets.org.au.

5 Start your own backyard vegie patch

“Growing your own produce is so easy and can be a lot of fun,” says McMillan. “Even if you don’t have a backyard, you can still do something – herbs and salad vegetables can be grown in pots on a balcony.”

6 Make friends with the neighbours

Some of the best things about living in a multicultural society are the food traditions we live among – one of the favourites with organic foodies is the European tradition of backyard fruit trees. Make friends with your neighbours and you might suddenly find yourself with access to fresh, in-season fruit (and a host of new recipes).

Above all, says Sgourakis, remember that choosing organic doesn’t mean making a massive life change. “You don’t have to become a hippie, just one small change a day to eating higher quality foods can make a big difference to your health and wellbeing.”

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Andrew Fletcher, national fruit and vegetable buyer for Aussie Farmers Direct (aussiefarmers.com.au), recommends you include these tasty morsels on your organic shopping list for spring.



PINEAPPLES are extra sweet in early spring. Cut them up and store in an airtight container in the fridge so they’re ready to snack on. Pineapples should be firm and if they smell sweet, they’re ready to eat.



NAVEL ORANGES have had a bumper season, so don’t be put off by their small size – they’re full of juice! All citrus fruits are picked ripe, so it’s best to look for oranges that are hard and free from bruises and wrinkles.



AVOCADOS Look for the Hass variety. To ripen the fruit, place in a brown paper bag with an apple or banana until it has some give if you push on the stem, and the skin is dark green-purple in colour.



MANDARINS Late-season mandarins are the perfect snack, so buy a big bag of Afouer mandarins – you’ll be surprised how easily you get through them. Apply the same rules for picking them as oranges.



RUBY GRAPEFRUIT is a refreshing way to finish off breakfast, and like most Australian citrus this year, will be at its peak in spring due to good growing conditions. Look for fruit with smooth, firm and shiny skin.



BROCCOLI is incredible for your health and is best steamed to retain its green colour, nutrients and crispness. Store broccoli in the fridge in a plastic bag away from apples and bananas, which can make it go off.



CAPSICUM will last up to a week in the fridge. Given that plastic bags make them sweat, it’s best to store in a paper bag or crisper. They’re so versatile when roasted – add them to salads and pastas.



SWEET CORN can be eaten fresh in a salad. Always buy and store corn in its husk, which should be grassy green in colour. If the fibres at the end are brittle and brown, it’s old.



BANANAS Spring should hopefully see the return of bananas. They continue to ripen after being picked, so buy yellow bananas with green tips if you want them to last a few days.

HOW TO PICK FRESH MEAT

Aussie Farmers Direct’s national meat and seafood buyer, Seamus O’Connor, offers his insider knowledge on what to look for when shopping for meat.



CHICKEN should feel firm to touch (not mushy) and be eaten within two days of purchasing. Alternatively, it can be frozen and is best thawed in the fridge the day before you use it.



FISH is always tastiest cooked on the same day you get it. A fresh fish should not have a strong smell; its eyes should be clear and the gills a bright pink or red colour.



LAMB is at its best from September to April (quality can drop during winter). White external fat and pink muscle is a good indicator of good quality and top flavour.



BEEF Look for dark pink to rich red flesh. If the meat has a sparkly translucency, it will be tough. Also look for “marbling” in steaks, as this creates flavour and tenderness.

Get a box of organic fruit and veg delivered to your door. Try the Couples Box, \$35 (aussiefarmersdirect.com.au). **COSMO**

