

# Q&A

## Bill Wolf

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BY ALAN RICHMAN

The spectacular success of organic foods—particularly since the National Organic Program (NOP) became effective in 2002—has seen overall volume for the segment soar to an estimated \$20 billion in 2007, approximately 3 percent of the total U.S. food dollar.

Unfortunately, organic acreage in the United States is nowhere near capable of satisfying the demand. In fact, our country, which used to export more organic products than it brought in, is now a net importer. Nor is the situation likely to change soon, given lack of encouragement by the government and perceived disincentives for organic agriculture. So, like it or not, Americans who pursue an organic diet must rely increasingly on foreign imports.

At the same time, almost all of us know of numerous incidents during the past two years or so in which imported foods were deemed responsible for serious health risks, and even deaths.

As a consequence, everyone who cares about the integrity of organics, including growers, processors and consumers, must be concerned about what might happen in the future. In this installment of Q&A, Bill Wolf, recently back from a visit to China and a mainstay of the organic movement for 35 years, discusses global sourcing of organic foods in terms of safety and consumer confidence.

Wolf launched the consulting firm Wolf & Associates, Inc. in 1995 and is now president of Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates, Inc., its successor. He has been president of the Organic Trade Association (OTA), was a founder of the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), founded the first national organic farming and gardening supply business. In 2001, he received the “Outstanding Individual Achievement Award” from OTA, and he is the author of one of Rodale’s most comprehensive books on non-chemical growing methods.

Wolf confesses that his passion is earthworms. “In order to be a great farmer,” he says, “do what an earthworm would like. On a well-run organic farm, there are 2 million earthworms per acre doing most of the



Bill Wolf and a farmer in China.

work for the farmer.”

**NFN:** What potential threats face the organic industry today and in the future?

**Wolf:** There are three major threats in my view. The biggest is that the organic industry today is in danger of losing its key core quality, the nutritional value that results when organic farming methods are used. Historically, the organic movement could boast of crops harvested from healthy, vibrant soil that was cultivated by committed organic farmers who loved the land and treated it with respect. Today, thanks to booming sales, many are converting acreage to organic with an eye to merely meeting the rules imposed by law—no more, no less.

The second serious threat is that the complexity of the organic regulation deters farmers, particularly when it is matched up against other unregulated socially desirable claims that can be made for food products. These might include “fair trade,” “grown locally,” and so on.

The third area of concern is that so many members of the organic industry are attacking one another for alleged violations that consumer confidence is undermined, and that is weakening the organic “brand.”

**NFN:** How does global sourcing influence the U.S. organic market in terms of product variety, availability and price?

**Wolf:** We must remember that some products such as chocolate, coffee, tea, bananas and sugar, are not grown domestically. It

doesn’t matter whether a consumer shops conventionally or organically, if he or she wants these products, they must be imported. In addition, the lack of sufficient organic acreage in this country sometimes makes availability an issue. Also, because some foreign governments support organic crops with subsidies and other incentives, and because foreign labor costs generally tend to be lower, imported goods often are sold at lower prices than those grown and processed in the United States. All these factors provide a marketplace advantage for foreign-sourced organic products.

**NFN:** Please specifically address China as a source of organic goods. To what degree can it be counted on to meet U.S. standards?

**Wolf:** First, let me emphasize that we need to encourage organic development everywhere in the world—including China. Second, recognize that China has a tradition of organic production that stretches back 40 centuries. Third, understand that China has approximately 5 million hectares of organic acreage, and that total is increasing.

Most of this acreage is devoted to serving the Chinese people. Next comes the export program, which is focused more heavily on European markets. As a result, relatively small amounts of organic ingredients are destined for our shores—mainly some specialized products such as edamame and other soybean derivatives, specialty oils and various herbs and spices, some of which are grown only in China.

All this notwithstanding, we must still worry about safety controls in China—just as we must with every other locale from which we source ingredients. The key is to know your source—know the people, know the land, know the facility, and, in spite of knowing all this, still make sure you employ a system of monitored controls, including laboratory testing for microbes and pesticides. Organic certification is important, but is only one support in a three-legged stool: you also should know and have confidence in your supply chain, and you must do routine independent testing. In short, if you are going to import organic products, trust, but also verify!

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**NFN:** Congressional investigators recently came back from a two-week fact-finding trip to China and proclaimed that Chinese food safety rules and oversight are inadequate. Based on your own visit to China, what is your opinion?

**Wolf:** China, a country undergoing rapid growth, is a land of contradictions. It has some of the most beautiful, fertile valleys, being cultivated by fine, caring farmers who understand organic principles and apply them properly. Conversely, it has some of the worst water and air pollution problems I have ever encountered, particularly at smaller farms located in or near some of the larger cities. Sanitation and proper segregation are challenges.

Bottom line: I prefer to use organic products grown as close to home as possible, but if I were producing an item that required an organic ingredient from China, I believe it can be sourced safely—provided proper controls are in place.

**NFN:** How are Chinese inspections and enforcement handled? Can we count on sources there to make changes and improvements we ask for?

**Wolf:** There are three different organic standards at work in China, including two run by the government. These two govern what is labeled organic for domestic consumption.

On the export side, organic certification is handled by five private accredited certification agencies (ACAs). The five are: the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA International), headquartered in the United States; EcoCert, headquartered in France; eco-BCS Guarantee (BCS), located in Germany; the Institute for Marketecology (IMO), based in Switzerland; and the Japan Organic & Natural Foods Association (JONA), headquartered in Tokyo. The first four are accredited by the U.S. NOP, and JONA works mainly with shipments destined for Japan.

In my opinion, there are varying degrees of quality in the certifications offered by

these organizations. As with any task, it often comes down to the people who are doing the work in the field, and the consistency and quality of the systems and methods they follow.

**NFN:** If a serious problem should occur, from use of improperly grown or processed organic products, what kind of impact would this have on consumer confidence?

**Wolf:** The first goal should be to avoid negative incidents. I see progress here. More and more companies are adopting robust organics systems plans as part of their compliance with Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) requirements. We call these Organic Critical Control Point (OCCP) programs. If any companies have not yet implemented a full organic system plan with such controls, they should immediately.

This being said, based on what has happened in the past, I would say that consumer confidence in organic products seems to be resilient.

Safety is a concern for all foods, not just organic foods. The more serious danger to organics is that the integrity of the product is not being pursued with the same fervor it once was. Successful organic farming is built from a healthy, vibrant soil, crawling with earthworms and good microbes being constantly fed by the decay cycle of green manures, crop rotations, mulches, and composts. Real organic is not just about compliance to the rules by substituting a few allowed organic inputs for chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides. It is truly about encouraging a sustainable biological system of farming that produces nutrient-dense crop foods.

If these growing principles are not strictly upheld, if the nutritional value and field-fresh taste of the food are compromised, we run the risk of becoming just another product on the shelf.

**NFN:** What other developments around the world are of concern to the organic community?

**Wolf:** Canada is our largest trading partner,

and its new regulation for organic products goes into effect this coming January 1. I can tell you that the Canadian standard is going to be substantially different from the one we have here. There is potential for enormous market disruption. Probably the best solution would be an equivalency agreement, with each country willing to accept the certifications issued by the other.

“Which standard is better?” Neither. Standards stem from different cultures, and different growing conditions, and different national infrastructures, and therefore reflect different concerns and values.

Some of the nations and regions to watch for significant organic development in the near future are Eastern Europe, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Mexico and India. Governments in all these locales are supporting organic farmers with subsidies, education and moral encouragement.

**NFN:** Please sum up your views on the status and competency of certification in the United States and around the world?

**Wolf:** The organic seal is the only label claim independently inspected from the soil to the final product and protected by federal law. There is much room for improvement, but the system has been getting better every year for the past quarter of a century. There are training programs available for certifiers from such organizations as: the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM); the Independent Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA); the USDA's NOP office; and more.

We have come a long way, but still have new frontiers to conquer. As mentioned, organic products are 3 percent of the retail food dollar in the United States, but less than 0.2 percent in foodservice. Organic in foodservice will grow rapidly, which is great since I am on the road about 50 days every year, and I try to eat organically wherever possible. **NFN**

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