

How Super Is Natural?

The real dirt on organic foods

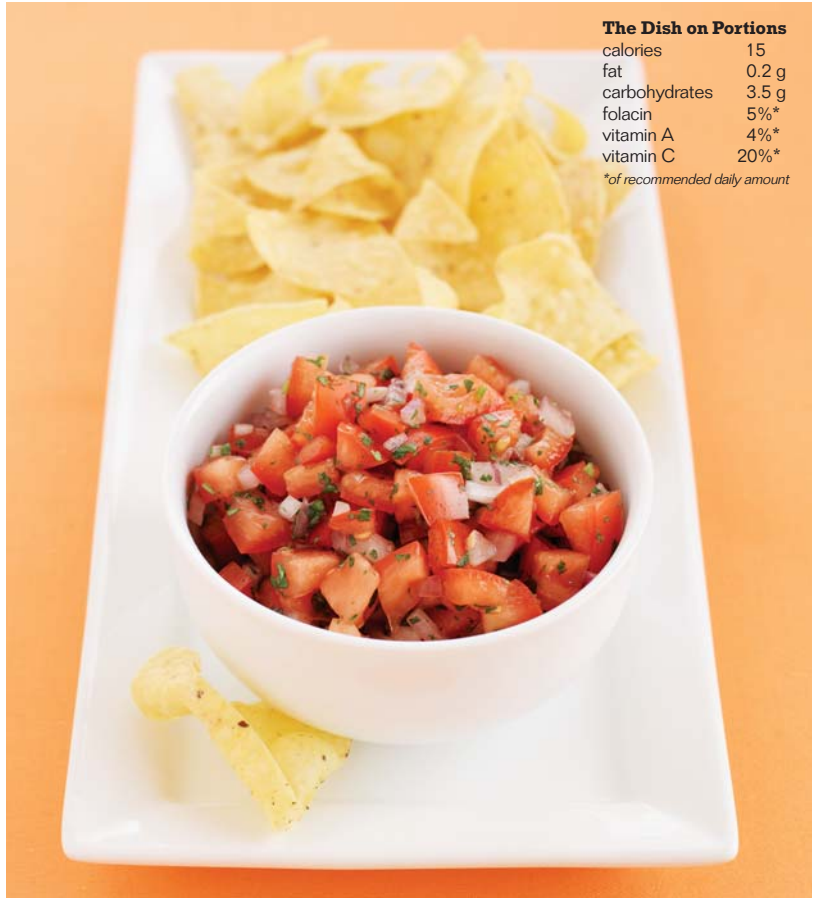
by **MADELEINE GREY**

I used to believe there wasn't enough of a difference between organic and conventional foods to win my grocery dollar. I was soothed by Health Canada's reassurance that pesticide residues are kept at safe, regulated and minuscule amounts. I had heard umpteen times from various marketing boards that there was no nutritional difference between organic and conventional. But now I'm thinking twice after digging through a mountain of research and coming out the other end feeling like a guinea pig.

We know that conventional foods have "safe amounts" of pesticide residues, antibiotics, hormones and genetically modified ingredients. But I have yet to find any research proving that it's OK to spend a lifetime eating these "safe amounts." Nor do we know the effect on our bodies when different chemicals we consume react together. So for me, organic wins by default, offering a safe refuge in the sanctity of what it *doesn't* contain.

Joey Shulman, a Toronto author and nutritionist, goes further: She's certain organics are a healthier option. "I'm a big advocate of feeding little ones — especially babies in their first year — organic foods. Why bombard them with chemicals? Their digestive and immune systems are too immature."

Children, it's argued, are more susceptible to pesticide residues because they have a higher intake of food per pound of body weight. This and the fact that their immune, central nervous and hormonal systems are developing make kids more vulnerable to health problems associated with high levels of these toxins. It's estimated that a child can easily consume minuscule amounts



The Dish on Portions

calories	15
fat	0.2 g
carbohydrates	3.5 g
folacin	5%*
vitamin A	4%*
vitamin C	20%*

*of recommended daily amount

Fresh Tomato Salsa

Taste the organic difference while tomatoes are in their glory this summer. Pair this up with some organic nacho chips and you'll have a winner.

- 1** clove garlic, pressed
- 1 tsp** (5 mL) salt
- 1 lb** (500 g) tomatoes, diced
- ¼ cup** (50 mL) red onions, finely chopped
- ¼ cup** (50 mL) fresh coriander (cilantro), finely chopped
- 2 tbsp** (30 mL) fresh lime juice
- ¼ tsp** (1 mL) red chili flakes

In a medium bowl, mash pressed garlic and salt together. Add tomatoes, onions, coriander and lime juice. Season with chili flakes — or halve the mix and season one portion mild and the other hot.
Makes 2 cups (500 mL).

Our recipe tester, Jenny Koniuk, tests Nutrition using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.

of 20 different pesticides a day when eating a healthful variety of foods. Scientists argue that more research is needed to understand the “cocktail effect” of these residues reacting synergistically in the body. In other words, high levels of one residue might cause a headache; another might result in nausea; but when the two are combined in the body, what is the side effect?

Pesticides aside, the organic option may be more nutritious too, and there’s a growing body of research to support this. In 2001, two large reports — one American and the other from the United Kingdom — revealed organic crops to be higher in vitamin C and minerals, such as iron, magnesium and phosphorus. Another more recent study from researchers at the University of California, Davis, shows that organic or sustainably grown berries and corn contain up to 58 percent more polyphenolics, a natural antioxidant that is thought to protect against disease.

Another study, supported by the US Environmental Protection Agency and published last year, measured pesticide levels in 23 children in Washington State before and after a switch to an organic diet. After five days on the new diet, researchers noticed a decrease in pesticide levels in the children’s urine, and concluded a “dramatic and immediate protective effect” from eating organic.

“What scares me,” says Nettie Cronish, a Toronto natural foods cooking instructor and mother of three, “is the toxic buildup of eating this stuff for 40 to 50 years.”

Despite this, Cronish says the top reason she chooses organic is taste. “It’s much more pronounced,” she says. “Start with carrots. It’s a familiar vegetable and you can taste the difference immediately. Besides, it’s not as expensive as some other organic produce is.”

DIGGING UP DEALS

Cost often stops consumers from going full-tilt organic. But price points have dropped dramatically since Loblaw’s introduced PC Organics in 2000. Now

Choose Your Dozen

The US-based Environmental Working Group, a public-interest watchdog, has compiled a wallet guide, *The Shopper’s Guide to Pesticides in Produce*, based on the results of more than 100,000 tests for pesticides on produce collected by the US Department of Agriculture and the US Food and Drug Administration between 1992 and 2001.

While this list offers guidelines for substituting organic produce, we still recommend eating lots of fresh fruits and vegetables when buying organic is not an option.

Highest in Pesticides

Apples
Bell Peppers
Celery
Cherries
Grapes (imported)
Nectarines
Peaches
Pears
Potatoes
Raspberries
Spinach
Strawberries

Lowest in Pesticides

Asparagus	Kiwi
Avocados	Mangos
Bananas	Onions
Broccoli	Papaya
Cauliflower	Pineapples
Corn (sweet)	Peas (sweet)



the largest single retailer and distributor of organics in Canada, Loblaw’s has over 300 products in the PC Organics lineup, with plans to introduce 35 to 40 products this year.

While Loblaw’s set out to price organic fresh produce at 25 percent more than conventional, Paul Uys, vice-president of control label and innovation at Loblaw Brands Ltd., reports being pleasantly surprised to find salad greens and baby carrots, especially in season, can cost the same as conventionally grown varieties. “The organic industry has grown and become increasingly sophisticated, producing products at comparable prices to conventional,” says Uys.

Other ways to cut costs are home-delivered organic produce boxes and farmers’ markets. Laura Telford, executive director of Canadian Organic Growers, says, “Certified organic growers generally put their certificate

about their stall for all to see. If there is no certificate and they call themselves organic, I would definitely ask where the certificate is.”

Another novel alternative is community-supported agriculture (CSA). Basically, it means a summer-long commitment to buy a piece of an organic farmer’s harvest which might be delivered to your home weekly.

As more consumers vote for organic with their wallets, prices are certain to decrease. “But just because a food is organic,” says Shulman, “doesn’t give it the stamp of health. Parents still need to abide by healthy eating standards. I could give my toddler Jonah an organic Oreo, but I don’t.” ❤️

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Wondering how foods qualify as organic? Get the facts by searching this article online and clicking on “Organics 101” in the story’s sidebar.