

‘The inscrutability of organic status’: Are you getting what you pay for when you buy food with an organic label?

[Editor’s note: In this article, the New Yorker documents a large-scale fraudulent organic scheme in the U.S. They chart a Missouri man’s decades-long plan to market and sell GMO and conventionally grown grain as organic to increase profits. The feature highlights the ease of exploitation in an organic industry that charges a premium for attributes that are easy to claim but hard to detect at the point-of-sale.]

Testing for residues is not common in American organic regulation.

The real difference, then, between a ton of organic soybeans and a ton of conventional soybeans is the story you can tell about them. The test, at the point of sale, is merely a question: Was this grown organically? That’s not like asking if a cup of coffee is decaffeinated. It’s more like buying sports memorabilia—is this really the ball?—or like trying to establish if a used car has had more than a single, careful owner.

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In 2000, organic sales in ordinary supermarkets exceeded, for the first time, sales in patchouli-scented health-food stores. During the next five years, domestic sales of organic food nearly doubled, to \$13.8 billion annually. The figure is now around sixty billion dollars, and the industry is defined as much by large industrial dairy farms, and by frozen organic lasagna, as it is by the environmentalism and the irregularly shaped vegetables of the organic movement’s pioneers.

A new national system of organic certification, fully implemented in 2002, helped spur this growth. Previous regulation, where it had existed, had been uneven: farmers in Iowa could become organic by signing an affidavit saying that they farmed organically. Given the inscrutability of a crop’s organic status, the new system was likely to preserve an element of oath-making, but the reliance on trust was now overlaid—and, perhaps, disguised—by paperwork. Organic farmers, and others in the organic-food supply chain, were now required to hire the services of an independent certifying organization—one that had been accredited by an office of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), the National Organic Program. A certifier kept an eye on a farm’s operation, primarily through an annual scheduled inspection.

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It’s unusual for a farm to lose an organic certification. If a certifier sees evidence of bad practices, the consequences come slowly. The farmer is nudged to reform, and, if then still found noncompliant, may be invited to a mediation. Only after those efforts fail is a revocation proposed. Actual suspension can take another year.

[This is an excerpt. Read the original post here.](#)