

# What Is In A Name? Organic: Sustainable: Certified

by Harry MacCormack

We are at a new and pivotal stage in the Organic revolution. Organic is the accepted opposition within the dominant chemical-petrol-industrialized food system paradigm. Collectively we need to be aware and extremely alert as we sit around decision-making tables with those whose visions are different from ours, but whose words sound like we are one-and-the-same.

ORGANIC is codified in very specific standards and guidelines. These rules of the game are a biological base line from which all other forms of food production are deviances. Some growers (I've not heard this argument from processors) don't want to participate in a program that tells the public that these rules are being followed. Hence we see the more and more prevalent phenomenon of non certified organic farms who because they are in local farmer's markets rely on farm name and reputation for continued sales. Several times this season I've had people tell me "I can trust my local farmer by looking him in the eye, to do what's right. He doesn't need to be certified to be organic." When I point out that in the market, quite often it is not the farmer selling, but the sales people hired by the farm who often never set foot in the fields, the discussion ends. Justifications around the term "local " take precedence. It is disturbing that the cultural acceptance of the word "local", which is not a regulated set of agricultural and processing practices, has displaced "certified organic" in many people's decision-making. We are moving into a situation, particularly in farmers' markets, where food production based on accepted rules is being replaced by food production based on perceived friendships. That these supposed farmer-consumer relationships may not in fact exist, or be transitory in nature, doesn't really matter. We are a society that is very good at engaging in and promoting dysfunctional relationships.

A new twist coming from the reaction to organic regulation, especially in its NOP (National Organic Program) USDA form, is "certified naturally grown" ([www. naturallygrown.org](http://www.naturallygrown.org)). Alice Varon, program director, says this is mostly a US and Australian program. Unlike USDA certifying agencies, CGN is allowed to offer advice and answer questions. They are also requiring permission for pesticide residue testing. So what does it mean to be "naturally grown"? First of all, both "organic" and "naturally grown" programs are based in a biological paradigm. Both programs are really about farming and processing systems that are attempting to align with naturally occurring biological processes. But, we should be clear: *There is no such practice as "natural agriculture". The closest would be hunting and gathering. Agriculture is defined by cultivation. Cultivation is a human activity rather than a natural process. Our standards within a biologically driven set of management decisions have to do with alignment with processes like bacteria feeding protozoa to bring about nitrogen and other releases, with bacteria and fungi breaking down mineral and organic substances to create fertility. The "Certified Naturally Grown" people hold to an ethic that comes from the same base as "Organic". Biodynamic Certifications are based in the same ethic.*

*"sustainable" type certifications are not rooted in the same ethic. We need to be very clear about this fact as we sit with various sustainability groups around decision-making tables.*

*"sustainable" is defined by the federal government as IPM (integrated pest management) and is rooted in the chemical agricultural paradigm. The twist, why we end up working with people from a very different paradigm vision, is that this is chemical agriculture with economic and environmental consciousness. As Thayne Dutson of Oregon State University writes when describing the new Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Resource Center, " (OSARC) is the result of more than 27 participating organizations, including farming, food processing, environmental and governmental agencies. The purpose of the center is connect growers with certification information needed to compete in national and international markets. " The president of NORPAC foods said : "We believe there is an enormous support for the value of Oregon agriculture and how Oregon family farmers care for their land, the environment, and nearby communities. " Sounds good, like people we should be involved with as our agricultural/food future is decided.*

*But what are Sustainable certifications based on? Look at the regulations given to farmers by Food Alliance. They are based in an integrated pest management chemical paradigm regulated for perceived environmental protection. There is an assumption in the sustainability network that targeted chemicals (albeit in lesser amounts) are necessary tools. I got a call recently from a shocked consumer who had just learned that a sustainable farm was allowed to use Roundup. Answer, "yep! " Read the certification regulations. As we said in 1989 in The Transition Document, "sustainable is whatever we can get away with. " In other words, sustainable is the dominant paradigm cloaked with environmental and community consciousness.*

*As I work on LOCAL food issues with [Ten Rivers Food Web](#) I find a table filled with people who loosely support "organic" but who are willing to compromise with some "sustainable" chemicals when it comes to production of local grains, beans, you name it. Why? Because what is being presented to growers and processors by the decision makers is not "Transitional Organic" (switching to organic practices for 3 years and taking advantage of a transitional market), but "Sustainable Integrated Pest Management", which for chemical growers looks easier. We need to speak as an Organic community — one that is much louder about the worldwide successes of organic practices, even at an industrial level.*

*Dr. Fred Kirschenmann of the Leopold Center in his latest "Toward A Sustainable Future" article says that a new ethic is needed and that the new agricultural/food ethic will be driven by emerging markets. Consumers (presumably those with money, not the poor) want "quality food offering superior taste, health and nutrition. " Organic statistics show organic superiority on these fronts. See the work of Dr. Charles Benbrook and others including, yes, the USDA. But here's the kicker, and an indicator of where we are really up to with food. Fred suggests that the next most important food relevancy is "a good food story. " This, ladies and gentlemen, is where a societal ethic rooted in advertising has gotten us. Not food quality based in rules, but food quality rooted in what sounds good. We see this everywhere on television — a beautiful farm scene, an old farm truck, and the latest not-very-healthful salad dressing. Pictures of idyllic farm life on a small farm brought to you by industrial agriculture using intense herbicide management to keep those rows clean, those pastures green. The new ethic is one of the old ones, not rooted in rules that are based in alignments with biological processes, but based in pleasure, the*

*ultimate wining and dinning experience. We all want this experience. We know that it is best achieved through organic practices. Now we need Organic vigilance to expand that experience for not only all humans, but all our kin, even the most important microbial kin.*

- Distance 5-star within 10 miles
- 4-star within 100 miles
- 3-star within 300 miles
- 2-star within region
- 1-star within 500 miles
- Freshness 5-star eaten immediately (U-pick)
- 4-star within 12 hours
- 3-star within 24 hours
- 2-star within 3 days
- 1-star within 7 days
- Tested 3-star residue free
- 2-star minute detection of residues
- 1-star near allowed limit

*Oregon Tilth is the only Certification group to actually deals with the residue question in organics. Our research showed that various residues are picked up from previous farming practices by various crops. Residue testing should be done for all root crops, squashes, melons and cucumbers.*

*A star system could work to educate and inform consumers. As usual it will probably be growers who will have to implement such a system.*