

THE SUPERMARKET CHALLENGE - ORGANIC FOODS

By: Jacqui Bushee

Like so many of you, I grew up in the "baby boomer" generation and remember those simpler times. I remember walking to the grocery store with my mother and carrying the shopping bags home. We had one store where we got everything we needed. We probably made more than one trip a week, but things were certainly less complicated.

Today the family shopper spends approximately 3 to 5 hours shopping and traveling to different stores. Why, because we can seldom get everything we need in one store anymore, especially if we shop for organic/ whole foods. What is the difference between "whole foods" and "organic foods"? Whole foods are defined as "any food in its raw, unrefined form. This includes all the unprocessed grains, beans, vegetables and meats". (The Green Guide.com) Organic food is defined as "produced without the use of toxic agrichemicals, especially pesticides, and without synthetic fertilizers." (The Healthy Kitchen, Andrew Weil, M.D.) These definitions appear to be synonymous and interchangeable.

Chef's Recipe

Tuscan White Bean Soup

¼ cup of pancetta
(or lean bacon) cut into a small dice
2 tablespoons of olive oil
1 large onion, roughly chopped
3 cloves of garlic, minced
3 ½ - 4 cups of chicken broth (or vegetable)
4 cans of cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
1 bag of fresh baby spinach
(washed and de-stemmed)
1 sprig of fresh rosemary
Salt and pepper to taste

In a large dutch oven type pot cook pancetta over medium heat until just browned. Remove pancetta with slotted spoon and add olive oil to the rendered fat already in the pan from the pancetta.

Add onion and simmer until translucent; then add garlic and stir for less than 1 minute being careful not to burn; add beans and broth. Increase heat to simmer and put in rosemary sprig. Cook for 15 to 20 minutes. Discard rosemary after 20 minutes and put in spinach. After spinach is cooked, about 10 minutes., taste to see what seasoning is needed. Remove from heat and let stand.

With an emulsion blender (can be blended in a regular blender by putting a cup of the mixture into the blender at a time), blend until smooth. Serve with Parmesan cheese sprinkled on top.

According to the Organic Consumers Association, 65% of Americans tried organic food in 2005. The top three reasons for this boom in the organic market were the avoidance of pesticides, the movement away from processed and refined foods, and unknown fears of genetically modified foods. Organic products are continuing to become part of the American diet as we all strive for a healthier lifestyle and realize that organic foods may be better and more nutritious.

Unfortunately shopping organic is not always "one-stop" shopping. The marketplace is made up of "whole food" specialty stores, which carry the largest selection of organic products; "super" food markets that carry a large variety of everything, but a small variety of organic products; and the warehouse stores, which sell in large quantities and have very few varieties. Some farm stores have excellent selections of fresh produce and meats, both of the organic variety but you still have to shop elsewhere for paper products and grocery items.

There are some things to be aware of while making your way through the organic sections of the food store and markets. First, the labeling. As of October 21, 2002, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has put in place specifics as to what can legally be named "organic". The National Organic Program (NOP) and the USDA have defined organic to mean the way food is grown and processed. Organic food is grown and processed without using most conventional pesticides, herbicides or commercial fertilizers. It cannot be irradiated or genetically engineered. The new national organic standards regulate all organic products and assure the public that they are organic.

There are also different categories of organic foods. If the label says "organic" it means that 95% of the product has organic ingredients. Another label you may come across is "made with organic ingredients" which means the product is made with 70-95% of organic ingredients. Any product using less than 70% of organic ingredients cannot be labeled organic and may list the percentage of organic products used. Don't be fooled by labels that read "Natural". This does not mean they are organic. Some meat is labeled "natural" and claims to have "no hormones" or "no antibiotics" on the label. For additional information on labeling and regulations see ams.usda.gov/nopota.com.

It is recommended that the following produce should be purchased organic because of the high usage of pesticides on the conventional product: apples, bell peppers, cucumbers, green beans, peaches, pears, spinach, strawberries, tomatoes, and winter squash. I would also suggest carrots and lettuces. For more information see www.consumersunion.org.

Helpful Hints

- ❖ If salad greens need to be crisped up, place them in a metal bowl in the freezer for 5-10 minutes.
- ❖ If you sprinkle salt in the water when you are washing vegetables, it will draw out any tiny insects and sand.

- ❖ Wilted vegetables can be freshened by soaking them for an hour in cold water with the juice of one lemon.
- ❖ When serving celery for dips always peel the stalks to make them easier to eat.
- ❖ Blanching green vegetables in salted boiling water, and then shocking them in ice water prevents them from losing their bright color.

There is another name you may have seen or heard about in reference to organic labeling and that is "Fair Trade". Some things that the fair-trade label is currently found on, are chocolate, coffee, tea and bananas. The label tells the shopper that the product was originally purchased at an above-average price and that the producer/farmer received a fair price for their harvest. That extra money is intended to enable farmers to feed their families and send their children to school rather than to work in the fields. They help the farmers, without cost to the consumers, because they cut out the middleman. Fair-trade products are available in many large food chains as well as large coffee chains. For more information regarding fair-trade products go to OrganicConsumers.org/.

Special attention is also being paid to allergen statements on food labels. The top 8 food allergens are wheat, fish, shellfish, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, soy and eggs. Products made with these ingredients or processed in the same facility must be labeled accordingly. This is an area of great concern since many people have allergies to these foods.

Organic foods do come at a higher price. The movement away from all the highly processed foods will create a greater demand for organic products, and in turn the prices will become more competitive, others will be encouraged to enter this market and ultimately bring the prices down. This increased demand for organic foods will make them more available for the "one-stop" shopping trip.

Zucchini Boats

Looking for another vegetable side dish? Cut a medium size zucchini in half lengthwise; scoop out seeds, then lightly salt and place flesh side down on a paper towel for 10 minutes. Meanwhile, seed and chop a tomato, toss with basil, breadcrumbs and Parmesan cheese. Lightly pack mixture into hollowed out zucchini then drizzle with olive oil. Bake at 350 for 20 minutes. (fresh chopped basil and freshly made breadcrumbs and also be used)

Bon Appétit! ~ Jacqui