

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

WINTER 2019

What's the Beef with Labels?

Buying the best burger requires scrutiny

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD

If a trip to the store to buy beef leaves you bewildered, you are not alone. Understanding the nuanced differences among the various products available in the marketplace requires a fair amount of homework and a healthy dose of scrutiny.

Unclear and sometimes downright misleading marketing tactics by industrial producers confuse consumers and shortchange farmers who sustainably produce the most nutritious beef using superior animal welfare practices.

Labels belie the complete story of beef production. Different farm management practices have varying impacts on the planet and human health. Here's a breakdown of categories and labels to help you shop smarter.

Conventional Beef: Intensive, factory-scale production contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, soil and water pollution, and land use concerns associated with growing cattle feed. Conventional cattle feed is grown in monoculture, with heavy use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and tilling practices. On crowded and dirty feedlots, cattle are not able to engage in natural behaviors, such as grazing and socializing. Deforestation of vital rainforest ecosystems has also been directly linked to beef production.

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Grass-Fed Beef: This label has surged in market popularity in recent years, partly due to consumer education about the harms of conventional beef production. But the label warrants a closer look. In January 2016, the USDA withdrew its previous “grass-fed” and “forage-fed” marketing-claim standards for ruminant livestock and their meat products. This means that the meat being labeled as grass-fed may not meet consumer expectations. In reality, this label only means that the cow has eaten grass at some point during its life cycle (most cattle are grass-fed when young and finished on concentrated feed).

100% Grass-Fed Beef: Although “100% grass-fed” beef production practices may have health benefits and can often be gentler on the planet, consumers should be aware that the label is not without potential complications and pitfalls. For example, some beef is raised on public lands (particularly prevalent in the western United States), causing

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Helping a New Cornucopia Take Root

Jonathan Rosenthal reflects on the future of the organization

Two months ago, I received a call from a trusted colleague who works at Cornucopia. “Would you be interested in helping Cornucopia create a smooth post-founder transition so we can deepen our work supporting ethical farmers, brands, and eaters?” she asked.

I knew from experience that when a founder leaves an organization, there is a unique opportunity as well as an imperative to reimagine the future. We discussed the various options.

I encouraged the Cornucopia staff and board to slow down and think big instead of rushing to hire a replacement. They embraced this advice and decided to hire an interim executive director to better position them for success in their leadership transition.

The interim model was developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation almost 20 years ago in response to the many organizations struggling to successfully integrate new leadership after the departure of an executive director, especially a founder.

The core idea is that an interim can bridge the role of an outside consultant and internal leader. The temporary nature of the role allows the interim to act decisively, while focusing on stabilization and readying the organization for new leadership without being distracted by building long-term power and relationships.

I was invited to fill the interim role. I said yes, without hesitation, because I believed I could help support the Cornucopia team in growing the organization to become a more effective leader in the movement to build a healthier farm and food economy. I said yes because I saw this was an organization with the integrity, commitment, and capacity to make a significant impact.

I come to Cornucopia with a long resume of leadership and collaboration in the good food movement. I started this journey working in the food cooperative movement. That evolved into co-founding Equal Exchange, the worker-owned, fair trade coffee and food company.

After co-directing and, later, directing Equal Exchange, I designed development projects and consulted with fair trade organizations on four continents. I got back to start-ups by co-founding a fair trade tropical fruit company, Oké USA. I then did more consulting with cooperative start-ups, international development organizations, and fair trade initiatives.

I returned to my food roots again as an interim executive director with a fair trade coffee importing co-op, Cooperative Coffees. Then, wanting to center on racial justice and transformative change, I moved to rebuilding a visionary network, The New Economy Coalition, organizing the move to a people’s economy.

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cornucopia.org
cultivate@cornucopia.org
608-637-8278

Jennifer Taylor, PhD

Professor, Florida A&M University
Organic Farmer, Former NOSB Member
Tallahassee, FL

Frederick Kirschenmann, PhD
Professor, Iowa State University
Organic Farmer, Former NOSB Member
Ames, IA

STAFF

Marie Burcham, JD, Director of Domestic Policy

Jason Cole, Assistant Director of Operations

Therese Laurdan, Donor Relations Coordinator

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My role as Cornucopia's interim executive director has several parts:

First, I will help fill in the leadership gaps left from the departures of Mark and Will.

Second, I will use my decades of experience as a social entrepreneur, executive director, and consultant to strengthen systems, clarify roles and responsibilities, and ensure the organization is running smoothly.

Finally, I will do a thorough organizational assessment and work with board and staff to address anything that would get in the way of an efficient hiring and transition to a long-term executive director. We will put together a thoughtful and calm transition plan, including a new hiring process.

Fortunately, this interim role at Cornucopia does not look to be as daunting as this work can often be. Cornucopia is blessed to have a highly talented and motivated staff and board, loyal funders and supporters, a strong portfolio of projects and pursuits, and a healthy financial reserve.

In the coming months, you will see that Cornucopia is moving forward powerfully. We will launch our new website with a refreshed organizational logo and look, publish new and updated scorecards, continue to build relationships in North America and Europe with like-minded organizations, and provide leadership and accountability within the organic movement in the U.S.

You will see more farmer profiles, continued bold insight and investigation, and resolute focus on reclaiming the marketplace for truly organic and local farmers.

We are evolving toward a positive future, pursuing accountability—in the marketplace and the environment—and working with trusted partners to build a more ethical and healthy good food movement.



Poorly managed transitions can erode organizational effectiveness and service quality, and even put a nonprofit out of business. However, nonprofits that receive the proper support and understand the transition process use these periods of change as opportunities for growth and improvements.
—Annie E. Casey Foundation

I am excited to have the opportunity to work with such a talented, hard-working staff and board and to be back, once again, to the food and ag world! And I am grateful for your support and collaboration.

Please join us as a good food advocate, a *Cultivator* reader, a collaborator, or as an informed eater.

It takes all of us, learning to work together, to build the world we want to live in ourselves and for future generations—filled with family-scale farms who steward organic and regenerative ecological practices, ethical labor relationships, healthy food, and a reverence for the earth.

If you have questions, suggestions, collaborations, or other relevant ideas, please get in touch: rosenthal@cornucopia.org.

The Year Ahead

Cornucopia remains steadfast in supporting truly organic, local farmers. Here's a glimpse of some of the things we're up to in 2020:

WATCHDOGGING

Continuing to receive tips about fraudulent organic grain shipments, the policy team will investigate entities suspected of defrauding ethical organic farmers and consumers, while pressuring the USDA to vigorously enforce existing regulations.

ADVOCACY

Our authentic organic dairy campaign will promote the top-rated dairies on our scorecard, telling the stories of the farmers behind the brands. This initiative will provide consumers with the information they need to support the best dairies in the marketplace.

REPORTING

The new Organic Beef Report and Scorecard will empower consumers who are facing an increasing lack of transparency in this market.

Cornucopia is embarking on a new chapter marked by collaboration, thoughtful communications, and increased visibility for our talented staff. While our voice is as bold as ever, we are forging new allies, including our valued co-ops.



A Chicken in Every Pot

How industrial poultry made the Cornish Cross a consumer staple

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

Ferretting through my family's old photos, cards, and keepsakes this holiday, I exhumed the journal of my great grandmother, Agnus Quandt. The small, leather-bound record reads more like a ledger than a memoir—a log of life on the farm in Utica, Michigan recorded in a stoic cursive.

This particular edition chronicles daily highlights from July 1937 to August 1944. Every month gets a two-page spread, where each line represents a singular day: “sowed radish, planted cabbage, cultivated potatoes, got baby chicks 600.”

Pullets went into the barn, pigs were butchered, sausage was made. Four times monthly, dollar signs declared a record of what sold during weekly trips, sometimes by train, to Detroit's historic Eastern Market. When months were flush, “Sunday, chicken dinner.”

In those days, eggs brought between \$0.28 and \$0.40 per dozen. Broilers sold at market were likely either the culled, male spring chickens (\$0.22/lb) or aged-out laying hens (\$0.20/lb).

But the chickens of a hundred years ago barely resemble the broilers of today. The majority of modern domestic poultry producers are more like factories than farms.

Modern-day meat chickens are a different breed, literally. The Cornish Cross breed is a mascot of agricultural industrialization, the hallmark of which is the ability to transform a day-old chick into a finished five-pound broiler in just over a month. And the ability to turn out cheap meat in large quantities has made chicken the most consumed meat in the U.S. today.

This style of chicken is a consumer staple, with its abundant white meat, ample breasts, and yellow skin. Grown by many conventional, organic, and



PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

homestead farmers, the Cornish Cross typically reaches market weight between four and six weeks of age.

However, with fast growth comes uneven weight distribution and sluggish activity. As a result, the Cornish Cross is more susceptible to illness and stress than slower-growing breeds.

But many family-scale farmers are working to make pastured poultry a viable alternative to the industrial model—and to the Cornish Cross.

Farmers continue to innovate, as they always have, experimenting with other strains for more vitality and ability to forage in outdoor systems.

On a recent trip to New England, I caught up with an old friend who raises broiler birds at Village Roots Permaculture, a diversified farm in the hills of southern New Hampshire.

Marty Castriotta has chosen to raise the increasingly popular Freedom Ranger, a hybrid breed that is typically slaughtered between nine and 13 weeks, depending on the desired size of the finished carcass.

When they first started marketing these birds, dressing out at five to six pounds each, Marty and his partner Ellen Denny spent a fair bit of time educating customers about the ease of baking a whole chicken, offering

instruction on how to make stock and break a bird down when needed.

Village Roots' customers often comment on the superior flavor and consistency of the meat. Marty explained, “The Freedom Rangers move around more with more diverse forage; they are excellent insect eaters. This improves the quality of the fat and the working muscles.”

Gone are the days when humanely raised chicken sold for \$0.22 per pound. Consumers can pick up a whole Cornish Cross at the grocery store for anywhere between \$1.00 and \$2.50 per pound. Marty must bring in \$5.25 per pound to make his chicken operation work as a business. Higher prices often represent the very best production practices in the industry: mobile housing, freedom to forage, and high animal welfare.

As industrial organic continues to thrive in the absence of strict animal welfare regulations, consumers interested in buying the most ethically raised poultry available are encouraged to know their farmer.

For more information, keep an eye out for Cornucopia's soon-to-be-released Organic Poultry Report. The accompanying scorecard and DIY guide will empower and inform consumers to find the very best poultry options for their families.

Between the Clouds and Seas

Working to cool the planet

BY MELODY MORRELL

As a grandmother, I pay careful attention to what my family eats. I grow nutrient-dense produce in my garden, and I seek out authentic, certified organic food from local farmers whenever possible.

I do this, in part, to keep harmful chemical residues out of the soil, out of the water, and out of the bodies of the people I love. But my real driver is the future of my grandson.

During a time when the planet is warming and drying, my food choices are more than a symbolic act. As a consumer of organic food and an advocate for organic agriculture, my food dollars support farmers who work to regenerate the land, build biodiversity, and draw carbon out of the atmosphere.

In order to more fully understand just how organic agriculture impacts climate health, I delved into the compelling and auspicious work of Judith D. Schwartz.

In her recent book, *Water in Plain Sight: Hope for a Thirsty World*, Schwartz skillfully outlines how humans can build nature-based solutions to restore climate health by better understanding the relationships among plants, soil, and water.

I had the pleasure of speaking with Schwartz last month from her home in Bennington, Vermont. Enthusiastically, she explained to me that “Over 90% of what drives our climate is the water cycle!”

The water cycle signifies the ways in which water is continuously moving on, above, and below the surface of the Earth.

Schwartz expounds, “Water, intrinsic to all life forms, is the ultimate shape-shifter. It expands in volume or retrenches; it retains

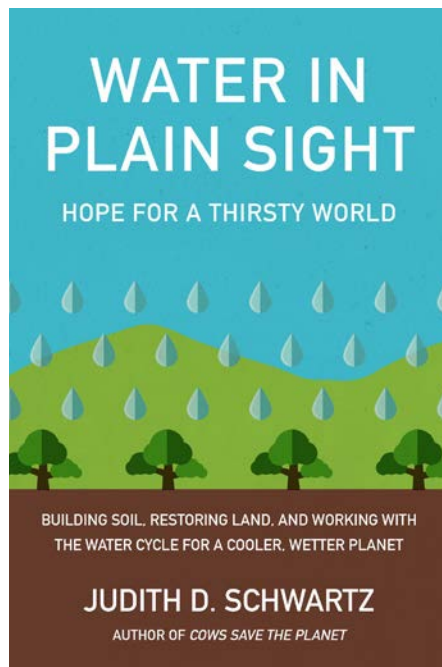


PHOTO COURTESY OF CHELSEA GREEN PUBLISHING

and releases energy. It changes state, moving from gas to liquid to solid and back again, in an ongoing dialogue with the earth and sun.”

Throughout her well-researched and highly referenced publication, Schwartz chronicles stories from around the world, artfully weaving scientific explanations through her accounts of on-the-ground examples that bring hope for solutions to heal the planet.

INFILTRATION: She brings the reader to Allan Savory’s Africa Center for Holistic Management, where community members restored perennial flow to the Dimbangombe River by strategically managing livestock around its banks. As a result of holistic planned grazing, entire villages that relied on aid are now food sovereign.

CONDENSATION: She introduces the reader to two farmers in arid, far-west Texas who collect 60 gallons of water each day by capturing dew in their “rain barn.”

TRANSPIRATION: And she explores Brazil’s tropical rainforests and their role in transferring large quantities of water from the ground into the air, simultaneously cooling the planet.

“My goal in this book has been to draw attention to the way water functions in the environment, to bring concepts like infiltration, transpiration, and condensation into our discussions of water problems and solutions. Doing so, I believe, broadens our repertoire of strategies with which to provide clean water to everyone on the planet. And to show that regenerating landscapes can revive water sources: this is where we’ll find our water—in plain sight.”

By guiding natural processes and setting a stage for the living soil, regenerative organic farmers are the conductors of this grand symphony, the divine consonance of soil, water, and energy cycles.

Schwartz loves the simplicity of this explanation from Australian agricultural pioneer Peter Andrews: *Plants manage water. And, in managing water, they are managing heat.*

Conscientious consumers everywhere are driving sustainability through their dietary choices. Now more than ever, we must support authentic organic farmers and practices that regenerate soil, water, and climate health.

The Cornucopia Institute champions the crucial work of authentic organic farmers, an investment in clean water, rich soils, health-promoting food, diverse ecosystems, and food systems that honor a sacred connection with the natural world—and signal a more promising future for my grandson.

We Need You

Why Cornucopia supporters say the feeling is mutual

Cornucopia supporters are in good company. Family-scale farmers, co-op grocery owner-members, business leaders, doctors, and good food advocates from across the country propel Cornucopia's work.

Members have unique reasons for contributing, but the thread that ties us all together is Good Food we can trust! Here are just a few of the many comments submitted with recent donations.

* * *

"Cornucopia provides unbiased information that is crucial to making informed decisions about the food we eat and how it's grown. They are on the front lines, fighting for small farms and individual choice. NuU-Muu is happy to support their efforts to make our planet healthy and safe."

—CHELLE DAVIDSON,
CORNUCOPIA CHAMPION AT NUU-MUU

"I grew up on a small family farm that produced food for our family. I never worried that the food we ate could be contaminated. I have passed my values on to my daughter. I just hope through your valuable work she will still be able to find true organic food."

— KARIN, SOUTH CAROLINA

"I have been supporting organics since the very early 1970's. I value family-scale farming and only wish I could contribute a million dollars for the efforts of Cornucopia because as *The Cultivator* article headlines: There is a crisis in Organic Dairy. I feel it as a consumer....especially with the "corporatization" of Whole Foods. Know I appreciate all those people who endeavor to support those farmers who have integrity!"

— BONNIE, GEORGIA



PHOTO COURTESY OF NUU-MUU

The fierce women of NuU-Muu, a women's exercise apparel company based in Bellingham, Washington that supports the non-profits that are most meaningful to its employees.

"Michael Pollan got us to thinking about organic food years ago. We have never looked back. For us, it is a matter of prevention vs. treatment, life vs. death. Thanks for your work. Your guides are a valuable service to those of us who believe."

— LARRY, CALIFORNIA

"Thank you for your scorecards! Over the last month, I have been able to shift all my milk, egg, and dairy product purchases from industrial big ag factories to smaller non-GMO producers (not to mention switching to reputable soy products and even using better toothpaste). I would never have been able to make this move without all your hard data."

— MICHAEL S., NORTH CAROLINA

"Organic food is an important foundation for health!"

— KELLY SUTTON
INTEGRATIVE MEDICINE MEDICAL DOCTOR,
RHODE ISLAND

"Cornucopia is a valued watchdog in an increasingly complex and compromised organic scene. Keep up the good work! We need you."

— LEE VAN DE WATER
GM OF POTSDAM FOOD CO-OP, NEW YORK

"We value Cornucopia as the organic watchdog organization that takes on the research and advocacy that is difficult for a grocery store to do on its own."

— CINDEE LOLIK
GM OF FIRST ALTERNATIVE NATURAL
FOODS COOPERATIVE, OREGON

"Every industry needs a watchdog. Industries that have successfully removed regulators and watchdogs collapse under their own BS. Having Cornucopia be a vigilant watchdog of the National Organic Program keeps it way more honest and something consumers can trust in."

—DAVID BRONNER,
CEO OF DR. BRONNER'S



Reber Rock Farm in Champlain Valley, New York



Chuck Frase of Full Harvest Farm in Wisconsin

“Full Harvest Farm, LLC supports the research done by The Cornucopia Institute because we feel it is an excellent guardian of organic standards. We believe in the soil-based guidelines as set out in the organic laws and run our farm in accordance with those guidelines. We are concerned that organic standards are being eroded by other agricultural influences that want to use the word "organic" without fully adhering to its required practices. Busy farmers do not have time to keep an eye on what is happening in the world of agriculture. It is comforting to know that there is an ethical organization like The Cornucopia Institute which does.”

— CHUCK FRASE
FULL HARVEST FARM, WISCONSIN

“I retired from the business world to a farm in New York’s Champlain Valley. My daughter followed us after Peace Corps, married, bought a farm, now also rent our farm, and we all raise grandchildren and rotationally grazed animals and fowl, and build soils. Your work inspires!”

— J. BINGHAM, NEW YORK

“I want to encourage everyone to support Cornucopia. The journey to truth is an ongoing journey. How do you know what's authentic? How do you know what truth is? Over the years, I have learned that if I want to know where truth is in the organic

food system, I go to Cornucopia. I am so glad that they exist and wish them many more years of successfully promoting authenticity and truth in the good food movement. Thank you!”

— JOEL SALATIN
POLYFACE FARMS, VIRGINIA



Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm in Virginia

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serious degradation to sensitive wilderness, impacting wildlife, polluting waterways, and destroying important cultural sites.

Imported Beef: Grass-fed, organic beef imported from overseas directly competes with domestic organic and 100% grass-fed beef. But management style for imported meat is often unclear, leading to unfair competition with domestic, ethical beef producers. Due to current regulatory policy, meat from an animal that was raised and slaughtered in another country may be labeled “Product of U.S.” if it was processed here. That’s an unsettling problem for domestic organic beef producers who find their products consistently undercut in price.

Organic Beef: The certified organic beef label is the most regulated in the meat case. Unlike “grass-fed” or “natural” beef, organic beef comes with specific, legally defined guarantees.

Federal law prohibits the use of growth hormones, antibiotics, and other synthetic chemicals in organic cattle production. Organic cattle must be raised on land and feed that are certified organic, without the environmental burden of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. In contrast to conventional systems, organic beef producers must pasture their animals for at least 120 days during the season. So, all authentic organic beef is grass-fed, but not necessarily 100% grass-fed.

Regenerative Organic Practices: Management styles vary on certified organic beef farms. Some organic producers go beyond the minimum organic standards in their care for cattle and the environment. Regenerative organic management practices, such as intensive rotational grazing on biodiverse pastures, employ livestock to facilitate and foster soil health, while sequestering atmospheric carbon. In this respect, careful

management of pastures and animals can help foster—rather than harm—climate and ecosystem health. Certified organic beef produced in regenerative organic systems is a value-added product and may be 100% grass-fed. Trustworthy labeling of this product remains to be seen, and, for now, consumers are left to discern for themselves which management practices beef producers employ.

Cornucopia’s forthcoming report will cover the complex landscape of organic beef production, including regulations, the marketplace, environmental issues, and the benefits of beef raised in organic, regenerative systems. In conjunction, Cornucopia will release the Organic Beef Scorecard, a mobile-friendly tool rating every domestic organic beef brand available at retail.

This research will empower consumers and wholesale buyers to invest their food dollars in the most ethical and sustainable organic beef production available.

Cooperative Food Hub Helps Organic Farmers Move Local Food

When Fifth Season Cooperative launched nine years ago, nearly all of its growers were conventional. Today, all but five of its 60 producer-members are certified organic.

“They moved to organics on their own, not because we required it,” says Sue Noble, interim director of the co-op. “And now, that’s what our markets are demanding.”

Fifth Season is a for-profit food hub in Viroqua, Wisconsin owned by producers, producer groups, distributors, buyers, processors, and workers. The cooperative model helps producers—small and mid-sized farmers—access markets they couldn’t otherwise.

It “jumps through the quality assurance hoops” required in the marketplace (think GAP training, certification audits, and product traceability), provides liability insurance, and plugs farmers into its network of distributors and institutional and retail buyers.



Those services recently attracted the attention of a certified organic hemp farmer. For a meeting with Noble, he brought along six bags of recently harvested hemp and questions on how to sell it. When Noble asked if he had interest in researching potential markets, he replied, “Gosh no. I just want to be out in my fields.”

Fifth Season is rooted in sustainable and organic methods that produce high-quality food. Its commitment to the true cost of that food—a reflection of its nutritional density, the ecological stewardship of the land on which it grew, and quality of life for the people who made it possible—is a guiding value and an ongoing challenge.

It’s one the marketplace is willing to support; there’s increasing interest in bolstering the 7 Rivers Region economy by supporting local growers with food purchases eaters can trust. “When you get all those components working together,” Noble says, “that’s exciting.”

Fumigated Food

Stronger protocols needed to identify food tainted at borders and ports

BY ANNE ROSS, JD

We live in a toxic world. Plastics, cosmetics, detergents—almost every product we breathe or touch could increase the risk of cancer, disrupt hormones, and even contribute to developmental problems.

That realization is why many people have turned to an organic diet. Conscientious consumers seeking to improve health and alleviate specific health conditions are among the fundamental drivers of the organic marketplace.

These organic consumers rely on regulations that clearly prohibit the use of most pesticides when growing organic food. But what happens to products after they leave the farm can be a concerning mystery for eaters.

An increasing number of questions from our readers underscore the apprehensiveness around post-production fumigation and what it means for organic food. Some are concerned that imported organic vegetables are being treated with fumigants at the border. Others want to know how we can ensure that fumigated food is never sold as organic.

In response to these inquiries, this is the first in a series of articles discussing the fumigation process, the chemicals used, commodities commonly treated, the laws that apply, and how we can ensure organic foods remain free of these toxins.

The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) oversees fumigation in this country. APHIS provides guidance documents, including the Fruit and Vegetable Import Requirements (FAVIR)

PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK



Once commodities have been fumigated, they can no longer be sold under the organic label.

Database, for importers, inspectors, and Customs and Border Patrol.

The FAVIR Database indicates whether a given commodity is subject to treatment, such as cold treatment or fumigation.

Per law, some imported fruits and vegetables must be fumigated at our ports and borders before they can be sold in the U.S. The fumigation requirement exists for specific commodities from specific countries when the USDA considers them high-risk for exotic pests or pathogens that could harm domestic agriculture or natural resources. These products should never be sold as organic.

When organic commodities arrive at the border, they undergo inspection. If pests are found, APHIS notifies the importer, who can then decide to have the shipment fumigated, destroyed, or re-exported. If the importer decides to fumigate, the process must follow APHIS fumigation protocols and be carried out by a company that is approved by APHIS.

There are variations in fumigation procedures based on the commodity and type of chemical used. Generally, fumigation will take place in a shipping container, under a tarp, or in the hold of a ship or barge.

The commodity is covered with a gas-proof tarp and is sealed. During fumigation, fans are used to help circulate the fumigant as concentrations are monitored during the process. After fumigation, the enclosure is aerated and then checked to ensure that the concentration is below mandated values.

Once the process is complete, commodities are released to the importer to decide

next steps. Fumigated commodities can no longer be sold under the organic label. The importer is responsible for changing the designation of the fumigated fruits or vegetables to conventional.

What happens if the importer continues to sell the fruits or vegetables as “organic,” and is the USDA verifying compliance?

The USDA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) shared this concern after an audit of the USDA's National Organic Program in September 2017.

The OIG concluded the NOP needed stronger protocols to identify organic food that was fumigated at borders and ports. In response, the NOP agreed to collaborate with APHIS and to share information across databases.

In future articles, we'll scrutinize enforcement efforts and penalties for violators, gauging their effectiveness in keeping fumigated food away from the organic label. We'll also examine the toxicity of fumigants, and the myriad reasons why organic forbids their use.

What do you want to know about post-production fumigation? Send us your questions at: cultivate@cornucopia.org.



THE CORNUCOPIA FARMER PROFILE

For the Palate and the Planet

Two years after devastating wildfire, a leader in organic wine takes stock

BY MICHELE
MARCHETTI

At first, Katrina Frey noticed the sky: an inky red, like a youthful Syrah. The Redwood Valley ridge that forms the backdrop of Frey Vineyards was on fire.

"I was more concerned for our neighbors across the ridge," Katrina recounts, "never dreaming that the fire was wrapping around the base of the mountain and coming back toward us."

Two years later, Katrina Frey, the vineyard's executive director, reflects on that calamitous evening, one that could have easily been the demise of the nation's first organic and biodynamic winery.

"I'm watching a grape truck come in right now," Katrina says, noting how rhythms of life that she once took for granted have become comforting signs of business as usual. Flames and smoke scorched 500 acres of woodlands and six acres of vineyards.

Destroyed were Frey's historic, redwood, two-story office, bottling, and tasting-room complex; 14 family homes on site; and more than \$1 million of unharvested fruit.

Thankfully, a caravan of 64 family members and residents, fleeing on

a route that traversed seven dry streambeds, made it out unharmed. Just two miles away, nine people died.

Frey's employees showed up to help the moment the roadblocks came down. Katrina attributes their loyalty to the inspiring mission of this three-generation, family-owned and -operated business that encourages care for "planet and palate alike."

They play a vital role in the Northern California organic wine movement. To meet demand for its certified organic wine, Frey contracts with other certified organic grape growers, helping them understand the standards and "encouraging them to do the paperwork farmers hate."

Some of those growers have been working with Frey for 30 years;

others are new partners who recently converted to organic.

The industry has come a long way, she recounts, since the time when people would routinely ask her why her 350 acres of organic wine-grapes were so messy compared to the tidy vineyards down the road.

The question has provided an opportunity to educate: Instead of dousing the land with glyphosate, the herbicide of choice for many vineyards, Frey nourishes the soil with a mix of cover crops and compost made from grape pomace.

Katrina's husband Jonathan, Frey's general manager and original winemaker, speaks of that compost with a mixture of awe and reverence. "There's probably no more complicated

PHOTO COURTESY OF FREY VINEYARDS



Katrina Frey has worn the hat of grape picker and bottler. But she's best known as an organic industry leader.

subject than compost,” he says. “There are huge kingdoms of microorganisms rising and falling and constantly adapting to changing conditions and nutrients in the compost. I don’t think anyone fully understands it.”

Lately, he’s been researching how to maximize charcoal, an abundant byproduct of the fires. He’s adding biochar to his compost and fine-tuning methods that allow beneficial microorganisms to set up shop in the tubes and caves of its porous structure. “It has a great water-holding capacity, so if properly conditioned, it can be an incredible adjunct to the compost. And you’re putting carbon back into the soil where it wants to be.”

The couple met at the Garden Project in Covelo, California, run by the acclaimed English gardener Alan Chadwick. Chadwick’s teachings are alive in Frey’s practices, including the decision to leave its 650 acres of woodlands under the wise stewardship of nature.

Jonathan, who in the 1980s served on a California Certified Organic Farms processing subcommittee and helped draft standards that would ultimately become the National Organic Program, is enthralled by the woodland ecosystem that has “kicked into a whole new gear” since the fires.

A family of hairy woodpeckers seeks out the beetles that live under the bark of all the burned-up trees. Termites turn the trees into huge condominiums, which ultimately fall over and turn into compost.

While nature takes care of itself, the Freys are working hard to continue reviving the business. They’re in the midst of rebuilding a massive production facility and tasting room. An important milestone was the day they replaced the expensive zero-oxygen bottling line that was destroyed in the fire. “That was hard to lose,” Katrina says.

As certified organic wine producers, the Freys make their wine without added sulfites, a synthetic preservative added to most wines (even those made with organically grown grapes). “Wine has, to some extent, earned a reputation as a natural beverage that it doesn’t really deserve,” she says, adding that demand for an additive-free product is growing.

“I think the seal is very important,” she says. “I know people who just shop looking for those products. At the same time, protecting the standards is a full-time job and, as Cornucopia knows, there’s a constant attempt to lessen the standards. I’m very concerned, and I think we need to stay constantly involved with the National Organic

Standards Board and the USDA to make sure the standards mean something.”

At Frey, an adherence to organic principles begins long before the label is applied to its product. Decisions about what to do with the land take time and ample consideration. The couple is currently debating the future of five acres of destroyed vineyards. One idea is to plant olive trees, which, like grapes, require minimal irrigation once established.

Those trees would eventually provide another income stream to the business. For now, like the waist-high wildflowers that have moved in since the fire, they provide hope in the face of so much loss.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ORGANIC WINE EXCHANGE

Tidy rows? Not at Frey, which is proud of its beautiful mess of cover crops that bring the perfect amount of nitrogen to its fields.

Frey
Frey Wineryards



The Cornucopia Institute

Elevate Organic



PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

For every “faux-ganic” brand fueled by multimillion-dollar marketing, there’s a community of eaters, farmers, and advocates working to preserve authentic organic. Cornucopia is poised to keep them committed and connected. We seek to engage millions of organic eaters to reclaim the marketplace from the corruption of industrial interests. If you haven’t already donated this year, please join concerned eaters and farmers in supporting the continuation of this work. We are inspired by your confidence in our efforts and honored to help build a stronger bond between informed eaters and ethical organic farmers.

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The National Organic Program

What they aren't saying is telling



At the fall National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) meeting, NOSB member and organic farmer Emily Oakley asked the National Organic Program’s Deputy Administrator Dr. Jennifer Tucker if the three-year transition period, during which no prohibited substances can be used, applies to every operation seeking organic certification, including hydroponic.

Dr. Tucker sidestepped the question.

While she said the organic regulations apply to all operations, she did not say the *three-year transition period* applies to all operations. This non-answer, repeated by Tucker multiple times over the past year, is, in and of itself, an answer: there is no indication that soil-less operations are currently bound by a three-year transition period.

When applied, this technicality allows organically certified hydroponic operators to compact acres of land, douse the area with herbicides and insecticides, and cover it with plastic. After establishing an automated system to feed plants without soil, a canopy of greenhouse plastic is erected. The resultant produce is cheap because our ecosystems subsidize the costs.

Allowing hydroponic operations to compete in the organic marketplace is egregious. Authentic organic farmers steward the soil. In turn, healthy soil degrades wastes, sequesters carbon, filters and holds water, and helps control pests and disease. In fact, soil and water cycles are intertwined in ways that scientists are still uncovering. Even in the best-case scenarios, hydroponic operations are incapable of providing these ecosystem services.

Watch for an upcoming Cornucopia Action Alert, enlisting your help to identify more hydroponic “organic” brands.