

THE CULTIVATOR

NEWS FROM THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE

SUMMER 2021

A Portrait of Better Beef

Cornucopia’s newest report and scorecard take the guesswork out of grilling season

Our new report details the value of authentic organic beef production, and our new scorecard — the biggest one yet, with more than 175 brands! — helps you avoid bogus claims and find the best organic, truly grass-fed, beef. Our top-rated brands are the antidote to the industrial beef that dominates supermarket shelves.

Factory farm beef is vilified in the press and jettisoned from diets, and rightly so. But very little attention is paid to the existing alternative — authentic organic beef. The Cornucopia Institute insists that authentic organic beef is vital to retailers, chefs, eaters, and local farming communities. Buying beef from your local authentic organic producer supports regional food infrastructure and can help revitalize rural communities.

Choosing top-rated brands not only strengthens more resilient and sustainable food systems, but also reduces risk of harmful bacteria in the food supply, promotes improved animal welfare, and benefits the environment.

Authentic organic farming systems bolster, rather than destroy, soil

health, climate resilience, and biodiversity. Creating minimal levels of pollution and erosion, authentic beef producers provide habitat for pollinators and nurture relationships in the living soil that cycle water.

And they do it all with the gamble that eaters will support these practices with their wallets. The payoff can be seen in your personal health and the greater good.

Dig into our reasearch at cornucopia.org.

We commissioned the illustration on this page from artist Fumi Mini Nakamura. Visit cornucopia.org to see her complete illustration depicting the differences between factory farm, industrial organic, and

authentic organic beef. “The choices we make around our food are often shaped by the lure of convenience,” Nakamura says, “And we often don’t want the total truth. I hope people can use this imagery to be more aware when they shop.”



Let us know what you think of the new report format at cultivate@cornucopia.org.

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Celebrating Berry Season

A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Friends of Cornucopia,

It is a blissful, if brief, time of year for berry lovers. I love watching my grandson close his eyes to savor blueberries and raspberries from a nearby U-pick farm. These local berries have a short shelf life, but the flavor is unmatched. My personal favorites are the tiny, wild strawberries that appear magically in my yard.

Yet there may be more than meets the eye when it comes to the organic berries in your local grocery store. Most organic berries available year-round are grown hydroponically or in containers, not in biologically active soil. The plants in these growing systems are bred to produce berries that will pack and ship well and thrive on a trade-secret cocktail of nutrients. Their production systems are entirely dependent on these off-farm inputs, miles of plastic tubing, and acres of greenhouse plastic.

When you buy local organic produce grown in the soil, you support authentic organic farmers. They do the hard work of composting, monitoring soil health, and managing pests organically in the field — all while responsibly cycling nutrients, carbon, and water.

You can taste the difference. Thriving soil produces the glorious flavonoids responsible for much of the color and taste—and antioxidants and other nutrients—in berries.

So, in celebration of berry season and of authentic organic berry farmers, we're launching our Living Soil campaign. Read more about the campaign in the pages of this issue and watch for upcoming articles to help you find the most flavorful, nutrient-dense, authentic organic food available.

We are also proud to release our Organic Beef Scorecard and Report. Recent stories in the media suggest that all beef is bad for the earth and our health, but grazing cattle can be stars of a diversified organic farm. Our report cuts through confusion about which beef is harmful to the environment and our scorecard ranks more than 175 organic brands. Let us know if we are missing your local organic beef brand — we'll send them a survey!

The *Cultivator* brings you stories you won't find elsewhere, and your gift allows us to do the kind of in-depth analyses and investigations The Cornucopia Institute is known for. Thank you, sincerely, for your support! We could not do this work without you.

Kindly,



Melody Morrell
Executive Director



Established in 1947, Bow Hill Blueberries is the site of the oldest family-run blueberry farm in Washington's Skagit Valley. Certified organic since 2014, this farm specializes in heirloom berries and has over 4,500 bushes that are a combination of Rubel, Stanley, Jersey, and Bluecrop.

Upgrading Our Look

Meet the new editor of the *Cultivator*

We're growing! Cornucopia is happy to announce the recent hiring of Patrick Myers, our new communications manager.

A major thread of Patrick's career is a fascination with the ever-evolving relationship between communities and landscapes. Through his work, he seeks to promote the idea of a land ethic and to foster deeper connections to place.

Patrick comes to Cornucopia with nearly a decade of experience in non-profit communications and development in the fields of sustainability, conservation, and recreation. He holds a degree in environmental studies from the University of Montana and a post-graduate certificate in environmental design from UC Berkeley.

Before joining Cornucopia, Patrick worked on wild fish issues in the Pacific Northwest, where he helped build a successful campaign to advocate for the phase out of Atlantic salmon net pens from Washington State. He also worked to communicate the complicated science



surrounding harvest and hatcheries and promoted emerging sustainable harvest alternatives. This work led him to more deeply consider the complicated web that exists behind the food we eat — an experience that ultimately sparked his interest in Cornucopia's work.

Most recently, Patrick worked as a fundraiser and communicator for Washington Trails Association, a well-established trail building and maintenance organization in the Northwest.

A published writer and designer, Patrick will bring fresh stories and infographics to Cornucopia. He's currently working on a redesign of the *Cultivator* that will make our stories more engaging.

Feel free to reach out to Patrick with greetings and introductions at myers@cornucopia.org



Send Us Your Berry Intel!

By law, organic crop producers must steward the soil. But the certified organic blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries at your local store may actually be grown on hydroponic and other soilless (sometimes indoor) "farms."

Soilless production carrying the USDA seal allows for unjust competition in the organic marketplace and threatens consumer trust in the label. As a Cornucopia supporter, we know you value transparency and the right to make informed choices.

That's why we are calling on you, as an organic advocate, to participate in a fact-finding mission.

The next time you go to your co-op or grocery store, scan the options for certified organic blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, and raspberries, and take some notes and photos. Then, **visit cornucopia.org to enter your data (search "Organic Berries Hydro Form").**

Your intel will be used to update our Hydroponic Buyer's Guide, detailing soilless brands for consumers and wholesale buyers to avoid. Collectively, we are a countervailing force against the industrial takeover of the organic marketplace.

The Living Soil Campaign

Shedding light on the philosophical heart of organic agriculture

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

“A fertile soil transmits forces. Originally, it was the only material on Earth that could hold water. It therefore became the theater where water, earth, and air could interact, where the earth could express itself in the endless variety of organic life.”

— William Bryant Logan, “Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth”

In authentic organic systems, soil is the headliner. Cover crops, compost, and minerals interact with

carbon and water cycles, enriching organic matter and biodiversity. Philosophically, organic agriculture has always been premised on the health of the soil.

But in a time when biology has taken a backseat to “efficiency,” Cornucopia’s new Living Soil Campaign reminds us that organic is synonymous with soil. In the months ahead, The Cornucopia Institute will reveal how fostering healthy soil leads to more resilient food production systems.

Living Soil will highlight the new science revealing how and why conventional systems get it wrong. Pesticides are not only a direct threat to human health, but they impact soil microbiology — to the detriment of both local and global ecosystems.

Cornucopia continues to press the USDA National Organic Program to enforce the required management of the living soil. USDA Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack recently confirmed that, regarding soilless systems in organic, “No final decision has been made.”

Soilless systems cannot measure up to the ecological complexity of authentic organic agriculture. With your help, Cornucopia will research the organic marketplace, pursuing transparency in favor of farms that encourage soil health. Stay tuned for more issue articles, farmer spotlights, and opportunities to engage in concrete action.

Living soil can feed the world.



PHOTO COURTESY OF M. KUNZ

Philosophically, organic has always been premised on the health of the soil.

This Little Farm Went to the (New Moon) Market

BY MICHELE MARCHETTI

A trip to New Moon Natural Foods in Lake Tahoe, California yields some of the best produce in a 200-mile radius. It’s also a small act of resistance.

New Moon’s two locations stock their shelves with certified organic produce, exclusively. They refuse to carry Driscoll’s or other industrial organic brands. Instead, they prioritize the “teeny, tiny independent” growers that don’t have the volume or clout to get on the shelf of larger

retailers, explains longtime produce manager Tammy Graham.

Small farms find their way to New Moon through the retailer’s close relationships with two trusted distributors, Veritable Vegetable and Tahoe Food Hub. Stars of the local food system, these entities work with farms that carry a higher price point than corporate brands, leading to interesting conversations in the produce aisle.

If customers balk at the price, Graham points to value. Those smaller distributors pay fair prices to

farmers. The quality of those farms is unparalleled. Small certified organic farmers (some “soil geeks” who have mastered no-till) sell food grown in soil that’s thoughtfully stewarded. The added value: ecosystem services, nutrition, and flavor. In fact, Tahoe Food Hub works primarily with chefs.

Without New Moon, customers in her area wouldn’t find this produce on the grocery store shelves, Graham says.

“And then what?” she wonders. “The next thing you know, we’ll be stuck with greenwashed organic products. There’s no coming back from that.”

A Spirit of Resilience

At Mitchell’s Organic Blueberry Farm

BY RACHEL ZEGERIUS

This past Memorial Day marked the 100-year anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riots. Generally known as the single worst incident of racial violence in American history, the massacre decimated the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma — once the wealthiest Black community in the United States, referred to as “Black Wall Street.”

The father of Philemon Mitchell was shot and left for dead, his lucrative trucking company completely destroyed.

In search of safety and an opportunity to rebuild, young Philemon Mitchell moved from Tulsa to Chicago during the Great Migration along with more than six million African Americans fleeing the rural South for the urban North between 1916 and 1970. In Chicago, he met his wife Jeanne and they began their family, starting with three daughters.

Jim Crow Chicago came with a different kind of racism, and the Mitchells eventually settled in southwest Michigan where, after working at an aluminum factory and planning for 18 years, Philemon realized that the sandy, acidic soils in the region were well-suited for blueberries. And so began Mitchell’s Blueberry Farm, with the first planting of bushes in 1968.

Fifty-two growing seasons later, the Mitchell family is still at it, on the same five acres of the same soil, producing 10,000-12,000 pounds of certified organic blueberries each year. As management of the farm transitions to the third generation, Philemon and Jeanne’s eldest granddaughter (of 38 grandchildren!), Kourtney Ketterhagen, is the

matriarch in training. “To be able to farm is an honor and a privilege,” she explains. “It is about the legacy and the connection with nature that we feel is critical to our human experience.”

The Mitchell brand is synonymous with flavor and quality. Each Mitchell organic blueberry is touched five times before it makes it to your cereal bowl. After being picked, berries are placed into a bucket, then into a lug, then taken to a belt for sorting into retail containers while workers meticulously set aside lower quality berries for juice or freezing. It’s a lot of handling for a delicate fruit. And Ketterhagen has her eye on nearly every berry that crosses the belt.

With a background in yoga philosophy, she sees farming as a balance of capitalism and spirituality — honoring people and plants, while still building a successful business. “The entire system challenge is to pay farm workers fair wages, invest in infrastructure, and charge a price that customers can afford, all while keeping true to our ethical farming practices,” she says.

These values take center stage as the Mitchell family continues to strategically build the business. Expansion will consist of the standard infrastructure improvements, but may also include partnerships with other organic farmers growing under the Mitchell brand, as well as the creation of top-quality, value-added products, like cousin James’ newly launched blueberry leaf tea and blueberry pie.

The Mitchell’s organic certification adds value to this system, affording their small farm a competitive edge over the larger conventional farms nearby. Ten years ago, the three-year transition to organic was a struggle—learning to grow in a different way, coupled with the added expenses of growing organically. But the family persisted with the spirit of resilience in their DNA. Ketterhagen explains, “There is a whole energy that comes from doing things well. You don’t even think about what can’t be done because whatever it is, must be done — in a timely manner, with precision and pride.”



At the Mitchell family’s farm, roots run deep. From left to right: Jeanne Colombel Mitchell, Florence Mitchell McIntosh (with 3-month-old baby Kourtney), and great-grandmother Marie Colombel.

Hot on the Tracks of Organic Beef Fraud

A look into our work investigating whistleblower complaints

BY MARIE BURCHAM, JD

In 2018, Cornucopia received a complaint concerning potential organic fraud in beef that was worth investigating. From the outset, this appeared to be a case where cattle were being laundered into organic status.

I started the investigation as I always do: gathering data. This step often involves requesting documentation from state and federal agencies, looking for first hand witness accounts, and gathering incidental information that can help fit pieces of the story together. In this particular case, I collected as much business information as I could, including the types and pounds of beef processed and sold by the businesses involved. I gathered other information from state brand inspectors — the folks responsible for keeping accurate records of livestock ownership and brands.

At the heart of the initial investigation was a cattle reseller. The business in question took on sick or cheap stock from dairies or other cattle stock sources whether they were organic or not. Then the buyer would attempt to nurse those cattle into good health and weight with the intent to upsell them for beef. I was disturbed to find the alleged cattle reseller was facing criminal animal neglect at the time, as well other criminal allegations relating to their livestock business.

Other evidence confirmed that the reseller was taking in at least some certified organic cattle. Through the magic of paperwork, it seemed that more organic cattle were being produced for sale than were being bought in the first place. Not to mention, I could find no evidence of anyone holding a certificate for organic livestock production!



ADOBE STOCK

As a watchdog organization, Cornucopia works to uphold integrity in the organic label by investigating complaints of fraud. Above: These feedlot conditions are far from authentic organic.

In general, if certified organic cattle spend significant time on an operation that is not certified, or if they are housed with non-certified animals, they *lose their organic status*. Any assertion claiming that those cattle remain organic is bogus — and illegal.

In this particular case, I spent a lot of time poring over reams of brand inspections, shipping manifests, news articles, and different accounts to piece together the puzzle of fraud. On top of the potential loss of organic status, it became clear that conventional cattle who had *never* been organic might also be entering the pipeline.

The middleman appeared to be “laundering” cattle with either no organic traceability, or suspect origins, by using fraudulent paperwork. Enter a butcher, who purchased the live cattle for eventual distribution as organic beef. In this scenario, the entire supply chain was riddled with suspected violations of organic law.

We don’t always find the perfect smoking gun: more commonly we

find evidence that shows a pattern of behavior. In this case, a pattern of criminality and the lack of a valid organic certificate for the production and sale of organic stock were the biggest red flags.

The use of different business names, different addresses, and the mismatch in pounds of beef received versus pounds of beef sold were also strong indications of fraud.

I personally do not have the ability to examine the validity of organic certificates — that kind of enforcement is the role of the National Organic Program. Evidence gathered, I turned over what I’d found with a written complaint to both federal and state regulators. The brazen kind of fraud I investigated in this case is uncommon, and NOP enforcement has increased since 2018.

But Cornucopia’s watchdog work is imperative. We will continue to meticulously track down complaints of organic fraud to uphold and improve the integrity of the organic label.

Cornucopia Welcomes Two New Advisors

Dr. Vimal Ramjee and Danny Simpson bring fresh perspective to Cornucopia

DR. VIMAL RAMJEE



One of The Cornucopia Institute’s newest advisors specializes in late-stage cardiac disease. But Dr. Vimal Ramjee’s passion, and the reason for his growing relationship with Cornucopia, is preventing people from needing to see him.

A senior staff cardiologist at the Chattanooga Heart Institute in Tennessee, Dr. Ramjee brings a medical perspective to Cornucopia’s work and our understanding of the constantly evolving science surrounding human health. What’s more, he offers a pathway to new audiences.

“As a cardiologist and culinary medicine specialist, I’m a believer that food is the real medicine,” he told us recently.

Dr. Ramjee found Cornucopia through our organization’s research and organic scorecards. He uses our tools to make food purchases that are good for both the health of his family and the environment and to support the farms and

DANNY SIMPSON



New Advisory Board member Danny Simpson learned the importance of organic farming, living soil, biodiversity, and seasonality at Wheatfield Hill Organics, an organic farm stewarded by his family for over 100 years near Durand, Wisconsin.

First farmed by his great-great-grandparents, and presently owned and operated by his great-aunt and Cornucopia board member Helen Kees, Wheatfield Hill was an hour and a half drive away from his childhood home in Holmen, Wisconsin. And it played a prominent role in his childhood.

“The farm was a convening point for the family — it was a welcoming place even before I became interested in organic food. At the farm, I was brought up with a family culture centered on organic food and environmental sustainability.”

During his freshman year of high school, Kees invited

Get to know the rest of the Cornucopia Advisory Board by visiting cornucopia.org/about-us/

farmers going above and beyond organic regulations.

He sees Cornucopia’s broader research into various aspects of organic food production as critical to upholding integrity in the good food movement.

“Cornucopia brings light to issues related to our food that are poorly researched. It’s important to have an organization that does a regular, deep dive into the ingredients and processes making up our food.”

Partially inspired by his own lifelong relationship with organic foods, as well as his professional experience researching the root causes of disease, Dr. Ramjee believes that much work still needs to be done to improve our collective understanding of how certain ingredients and foods impact cardiac and overall health.

“Consumers need the information Cornucopia provides because the food industry has left people confused. It is essential to have an objective, science-based organization doing the work Cornucopia is doing.”

Simpson to help run the farm’s stand at the local farmers market. He was immediately hooked and worked as a farmhand and vendor for the next six years.

This close connection with Wheatfield Hill continues to fundamentally shape his burgeoning career in the organic and local food movement. As the assistant manager of Hulings Rice Food Center at Northland College, Simpson oversees campus gardens; local food initiatives; and the Larson Food Lab, a state-licensed local food processing facility, shared-use kitchen, and a culinary classroom.

Simpson’s wealth of knowledge and experience is an exciting addition to Cornucopia’s Advisory Board.

“What I value most about Cornucopia is the organization’s work to keep farms in families, help small-scale farming remain viable, and keep land in the community.”

As his story illustrates, defending the integrity of organic is more than a tagline. It’s a family calling that benefits us all.



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AS A DONOR OF CORNUCOPIA, YOU ARE A VALUABLE MEMBER OF THE ORGANIC FOOD MOVEMENT. WE ARE PLEASED TO CONTINUE TO BRING YOU QUARTERLY ISSUES OF THE NEWSLETTER AS A BENEFIT OF YOUR SUPPORT.

Carrageenan Controversy Continues

Currently allowed in organic food, carrageenan is getting another look.

During this fall's sunset review, the National Organic Standards Board will vote on whether to recommend removing carrageenan from the National List of Approved Substances.

Cornucopia believes that carrageenan fails to meet the required criteria to be organic. "Generally recognized as safe" by the Food and Drug Administration, carrageenan has predictably caused inflammation in thousands of experiments.

It is nearly impossible to avoid carrageenan, a processing aide, because it isn't always listed on the ingredient panel. (Case in point: ice cream.)

Cornucopia's forthcoming action alerts, issue articles, and updated guide will continue to expose use of this controversial substance.

Origin of Livestock Rule Up for Comment — Again

The National Organic Program (NOP) recently re-opened the comment period on the 2015 Origin of Livestock rulemaking, soliciting stakeholder input on a few questions that will likely inform the rule's next iteration.

Despite the clear intent of organic law, some organic certifiers allow dairies to transition conventional cows into their operations. Offending dairies with established herds buy cheap conventional heifers that are transitioned over an allowable one-year period — an exception that was intended to account for newly certified dairy producers. These purchases are conveniently timed so that the conventional heifers are exactly one year away from giving birth and producing milk. Calves born into this system are sold to avoid the steep costs of complying with the law, which requires organic management from the last third of gestation.

Those operations avoid myriad costs and time investments, flooding the market with "organic milk" and undercutting authentic organic farmers.

Without a well-constructed final rule, there will never be a level playing field.

"The final rule should contain strict, specific language that closes loopholes and ensures enforcement," says Marie Burcham, JD, The Cornucopia Institute's policy director. "Cornucopia supports an outright prohibition on the sale and use of transitioned animals outside the exception for new organic dairies."

Cornucopia recently sent a survey to all US organic dairies, seeking farmer feedback on this high-stakes issue. We will share the findings, along with our comments on proposed regulatory language, with the NOP.

Organic dairy farmers and other interested stakeholders can comment directly to the NOP at <https://tinyurl.com/livestockorigin>. The comment period closes on July 12, 2021.