

CULTIVATOR

Winter 2022

News from The Cornucopia Institute

cornucopia.org

Photo by Stacy Howell

The Investigator

Deepening our watchdog work with boots on the ground

Take note, organic rulebreakers: Anne Ross is returning to Cornucopia. A distinguished attorney with a track record of uncovering the truth, Ross is stepping confidently into the new role of Organic Investigator.

Cornucopia's former director of international policy, Ross gained esteem in the organic community for her ambitious investigation into fraudulent organic imports. Her work informed major policy changes within the USDA National Organic Program, leading to stricter enforcement and initiatives to trace the integrity of organic goods in the marketplace.

With Ross' new role, Cornucopia will crisscross the US to bring you the story about what's really happening in organic. "We know you don't have time to do hours upon hours of research. That's where we can come in and assist," she says.

Embedded in the field, Ross will document evidence of potential fraud on factory organic operations, while also building formative relationships with farmers undercut by these operations.

Cornucopia's supporters get a front-row seat. Expect video, images, and travelogues as Ross launches her investigations and grassroots coalition building. New alliances with authentic organic farmers, co-ops, and independent retailers will



Where is Anne Ross? Stay tuned as she investigates the best and worst of organic.

help you become a better organic advocate. We hope Anne's reports will inspire you to share what you've learned about organic food, and why some production practices are better than others, with the people in your community.

As a Cornucopia supporter, you helped dream this into being. Thank you for trusting us to represent your voice — on the ground at government meetings, at key industry events, and to farmers in the field.

With your help, we can continue to cultivate needed hope, highlight the many bright spots in organic farming, and connect you to the farmers and food system changemakers who embody a commitment to the soil, our communities, and our health.

You can support this project by investing with a gift today.

We want to hear from you! If you have a tip for Anne, send an email to tips@cornucopia.org.



Photo courtesy of The Neahtawanta Research and Education Center

The Good-Food Fight

A letter from Cornucopia's executive director

Dear Cornucopia supporter,

This fall, our board and staff met at Neahtawanta Inn in Traverse City, Michigan. We moved our conversations from the porch to the shallows of the bay to a late-night bonfire. And we talked about you — a lot. *How can we help you find authentic organic food?*

It's no accident we wound up at Neahtawanta. This gathering space was founded in the 1970s to offer activists a place to recharge and rethink. It is magical. We strategized and sharpened our focus, and we all walked away with renewed commitment to you.

I was reminded that — when we align our thinking, our hearts, and our actions — we can move mountains.

Cornucopia will continue to work with you to build resilient food systems for our children and grandchildren. As mega-brands spin tales with marketing, we will uncover the truth in organic, tracking food from the field to the grocery shelf to make sure you get what you pay for. And we will use what we know to press the USDA for stronger, clearer regulations.

Cornucopia defends your right to know the truth about the food you eat. Our scorecards have now been viewed more than a million times! We have helped people find authentic organic food since we created our first scorecard in 2006. But it still isn't enough. We need you.

We need you to do the thing that comes naturally to you: Care.



Sally Vanvleck and her late husband, Bob Russell, founded the Neahtawanta Research and Education Center in 1987. Their legacy of activism and civil engagement is alive and well throughout the community and beyond.

Your deep care for the food you eat guides you to authentic organic brands. That same dedication to the health of people and the planet leads you to invest in biodiversity and resilient soils, and your sense of fairness demands to hear the truth, unflinchingly.

You have cared for Cornucopia as well, through generous gifts and kind letters. As one of our allies said, "Cornucopia has been an invaluable friend and guide in the wilderness of industrial food products and propaganda, bringing transparency so that I can make informed decisions, improve my health, and vote with my pocketbook."

Our investigations require expertise and dogged effort. Your generous gifts make this work possible. We don't receive government grants, advertising dollars, or payouts from folks who want us to tell convenient stories. The vast majority of our budget comes from partners just like you.

With the future of our food system in your heart, please support Cornucopia today.

Kindly,

Melody Morrell
Executive Director

Organic Strikes Back

Anti-organic propaganda is on the rise. Here's how to address it

Kestrel Burcham

The holidays bring an abundance of organic food, but they also bring family members and friends claiming that organic is no better than conventional.

Attacks on the label are surging, filling your dinner time discussions, newsfeeds, and publications with misinformation. Industry is the hidden voice behind these campaigns, which rely on "research" that is manipulated by the chemical companies that fund it. Why? Because your appreciation for authentic organic farming threatens industrial agriculture's bottom line.

Here are some fact-based talking points to help you speak back to anti-organic propaganda:

Organic food is a scam because pesticides are still allowed. The facts: Pesticides must be rigorously reviewed to be allowed in organic production. And they are re-reviewed every five years.

That review process addresses toxicity, environmental and human health concerns, and impacts on soil health, among other considerations. Very few substances get the green light. Yet anti-organic propaganda never acknowledges the hundreds of pesticides that are used in conventional agriculture, many of which are linked to serious human health and environmental concerns. That includes glyphosate and dicamba. Despite what people may be telling you, they are *not* allowed in organic.

Organic food isn't "healthier." Studies funded by Big Food show similar *macronutrients* (e.g., protein and fat) in organic and conventional foods. However, on average, organic foods are higher in certain *micronutrients*, including polyphenols and antioxidants. And we are only beginning to understand how soil health impacts the nutrient density of our food.

An important piece often missing from this discussion is that a diet in organic foods significantly lowers exposure to pesticide residues, including commonly used chemicals that have been identified as endocrine disruptors.

Where are the Big Food studies showing that conventional agriculture causes innumerable threats to human health? You won't find any. Apparently, air and water pollution, exposure to antibiotic-resistant bacteria, and fragile food infrastructures aren't relevant to our health.

Organic production is worse for the environment. This argument is easy to puncture: Studies pointing to the inefficiency of organic food are outdated and disproven. The *credible* research on organic systems shows benefits to soil health and ecosystem services that positively impact climate health and resilience over time.

Organic production can't feed the world. Naysayers in your circles have no valid evidence to support this claim. That's because research from Rodale Institute and other institutions shows that established organic production systems produce yields on par with conventional. And organic systems consistently perform better in extreme weather, such as flood and drought.

Here's the truth: Organic production can produce plenty of food and is increasingly *necessary* to keep the food system secure.



At Alexandre Family Farm, pastures consist of 50 to 100 plant species. If you can't find Alexandre or other highly rated farms from our Organic Egg Scorecard in your store, Cornucopia recommends industrial organic brands over industrial brands without the seal.

Photo courtesy of Alexandre Family Farm



Where You Shop Matters

An excerpt from *Concentration and Power in the Food System* by Dr. Phil Howard

Photo courtesy of Kimberton Whole Foods



Retailing is the closest link in the food chain to consumers. This structural position gives these firms a gatekeeper role, and thereby the potential to wield enormous power over both consumers and suppliers. Rigorous enforcement of US antitrust laws encouraged supermarket chains to exercise dominance at a more limited regional level through the 1970s. Changes in judicial interpretation and enforcement since then, however, have allowed firms to become increasingly national and global in scope.

The Shifting Landscape of Antitrust Regulation

Antitrust regulation has a long and complicated history. As long

ago as the late 1800s, the negative impacts of industry concentration led to social movements opposing mergers and acquisitions. Many of these movements were led by farmers, who were exploited by powerful banks, railroads, and meat processors. The radical Populist Movement in the US and Canada pressured national governments to enact antitrust laws, such as the Anti-Combines Act in Canada in 1889, and the Sherman Antitrust Act in the US in 1890. The reformist Progressive Movement in the US also worked to counter the growing power of trusts, and successfully lobbied in favor of legislation, including the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914, the Packers and Stockyards

Act of 1921, and the Robinson-Patman Act of 1936.

The Robinson-Patman Act was particularly relevant to retailers, as it was also known as the “Anti-A&P Act.” The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company, or A&P, was the first supermarket chain in the US, and it was the Walmart of its day, operating 16,000 stores by 1930, and controlling 12 percent of

Above: Independent retailers like Kimberton Whole Foods (KWF) in Southeastern Pennsylvania, aren't just grocery stores — they're community change agents. KWF marked Plastic-Free July by encouraging shoppers and team members to bring their own jars to fill in its bulk section.

the national grocery market. The firm used its size to negotiate discounts based on volume from suppliers. Smaller competitors were unable to obtain these cost reductions, and their higher retail prices led consumers to shift their purchases to A&P. The Robinson-Patman Act prohibited these price breaks, due to their anti-competitive impacts and the potential for A&P to become even more dominant in the grocery industry. A sponsor of the legislation, Wright Patton, stated its purpose was “to protect the independent merchant, the public whom he serves and the manufacturer from whom he buys, from exploitation by unfair competitors.”

By the 1970s, however, dominant firms in numerous industries were chafing against the limits imposed by antitrust laws, particularly in their efforts to increase their power faster than competitors. They employed numerous strategies to overcome these limits, but one that was quite successful was contributing financially to politicians who campaigned on platforms of deregulation. In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president. He directed regulatory agencies to reduce their enforcement of antitrust laws, with the rationale that large firms were now competing in a global market. Deals that would not have been allowed previously were swiftly approved at the national level. In addition, the burden of proof on those potentially harmed by concentration was raised.

Another very effective strategy was to influence judges in order to change the way they interpreted antitrust laws. Beginning in the late 1970s, large corporations funded public

Top 5 Retailers and Wholesalers

2021-2022 US sales as reported in July 2022 *Supermarket News*

Wal-Mart = \$466.8 billion

Amazon (includes Amazon Fresh, Whole Foods, & Amazon Go) = \$279.8 billion

Costco = \$141.4 billion

Kroger = \$137.9 billion

Walgreens = \$112 billion

** At press time, Kroger and Albertsons (\$71.9 billion) were pursuing a merger*

and private think tanks, which in turn arranged for judges to go on all-expenses-paid junkets. These were typically held at resorts in warm weather states, where the judges could play golf. While there, they would also attend seminars presented by Chicago School economists suggesting that mergers and acquisitions would increase efficiency and should not be opposed unless there was clear evidence of harm to consumers. This was a dramatic change from the intent of legislation noted above, and most prominently advocated by University of Chicago graduate Robert Bork, who was a law professor at Yale. By the early 1990s, an estimated two-thirds of all federal judges had participated in at least one of these programs, which was affiliated with George Mason University. A judge

even stated in this program's promotional literature that “as a result of my better understanding of marginal costs, I have recently set aside a \$15 million anti-trust verdict.”

Despite strong criticism from nonprofit organizations and unflattering media coverage, such as an ABC News television report in 2001, these judicial junkets have continued. In addition, a small number of economists with Chicago School perspectives frequently serve as expert witnesses for corporations seeking approval for mergers and acquisitions. They may charge more than \$1,000 an hour to develop complicated mathematical models that optimistically predict competition will not be harmed by these ownership changes, although no one checks later to see if these forecasts turned out to be accurate. Ruling against the plaintiffs in antitrust suits is increasingly the norm, and while the laws still technically exist, they have essentially been repealed by judicial interpretation. Although retailers were far from the only firms to play an active role in reshaping the regulatory landscape, they were able to take advantage of these changes.

Citations have been omitted due to space constraints, but they can be found at cornucopia.org.

Cornucopia's Who Owns Organic? poster is informed by Dr. Howard's research.

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WHO OWNS ORGANIC?

<div>PEPSI \$47.6 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>TYSON \$45.1 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>NESTLÉ \$31.3 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>JBS GROUP \$33.7 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>KRAFT HEINZ \$20.3 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>GENERAL MILLS \$15.7 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>MARS FOOD \$12.5 billion</div> <div></div>
<div>COCA-COLA \$13.2 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>CONAGRA \$11.5 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>HORMEL \$11.4 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>CARGILL \$10 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>BIMBO BAKERIES \$8.6 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>KELLOGG \$8.2 billion</div> <div></div>	
<div>MONDELEZ \$8.3 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>HERSHEY FOODS \$8.2 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>KEURIG DR. PEPPER \$7.4 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>DANONE NA \$6 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>B&G FOODS \$2 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>PERDUE \$4.7 billion</div> <div></div>	
<div>LACTALIS AMERICAN GROUP \$6 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>FLOWERS FOODS \$4.3 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>FOSTER FARMS \$2.4 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>POST FOODS \$5.7 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>HAIN CELESTIAL \$1.7 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>J&J SNACK FOODS \$1.1 billion</div> <div></div>	<div>JAB HOLDING Multinational Conglomerate</div> <div></div>

Figures based on 2021 total sales for each parent company.



Passion Project

The journey of an organic juice brand

Rachel Zegerius

"Uncle Matt" joined me on Zoom as a hurricane whipped rain onto the side of his office building. But that's how fourth-generation citrus grower Matt McLean faces life and business: head on, with optimism. This characteristic has served him well when navigating the many twists and turns on the road to becoming the nation's #1 selling brand of organic orange juice.

The McLeans launched Uncle Matt's Organic in 1999; the business quickly expanded to include 35 Florida citrus growers and 1,500 acres of organically managed groves. With a blueprint to expand to 5,000 acres, they were committed to converting more farms and more groves to organic.

But, just 10 years after they got their start, Florida citrus production was brought to its knees by a tiny bug, a psyllid, and the bacteria-induced citrus greening disease it carried. The greening disease eventually decimated two-thirds of Florida's citrus production. Organic producers were not immune, and Uncle Matt's Florida groves depleted to just 100 acres.

At the same time, as key investors pulled out, food industry (dairy) giant Dean Foods stepped in and offered to buy Uncle Matt's Organic. It acquired the company in 2017 and kept Matt and most of his team on to manage production. But even with their 6,000 trucks, 17,000 employees, and an \$8 billion annual budget, Dean Foods was not resilient enough to withstand changes in the dairy marketplace and eventually went bankrupt.



Photo courtesy of Uncle Matt's Organic

Uncle Matt's Organic weathered the storm. Matt and his family teamed up with some heavy hitters in the organic consumer packaged goods industry, and together they bought the business back from Dean in the spring of 2020.

The company is now, once again, independently owned and operated. Matt's wife, Susan, leads product innovation: It's easier for a privately owned company to be more creative and nimble. Research and development continues on the groves in Florida, where Matt's brother Ben is busying himself with finding a solution to citrus greening. (Oranges and other citrus fruit produced for Uncle Matt's Organic

are now grown on groves in Southern Texas, California, and the east coast of Mexico, where high summer temperatures kill off the bacteria responsible for greening disease.)

Through it all, the brand has remained unshaken. "We're proud of the long-standing heritage of the Uncle Matt's Organic brand," shares McLean, "and the way we, as a company, continue to stay committed to our core values, including positively impacting the environment with organic farming practices to benefit the people and communities we touch."

Find more brands like Uncle Matt's on the Independent Organic Brand Project page of cornucopia.org.

Common Ground

A New Hampshire food hub models how community support is essential to the future of organic farms

Michele Marchetti

One year after Molly Alfonso joined Vegetable Ranch, her mentor — owner and organic food champion Larry Pletcher — suddenly passed away. "I was devastated," she recalls. "It was hard to move forward. But I went back to work the same day it happened. That's what Larry would have wanted."

As one of the first certified organic farms in New Hampshire, Vegetable Ranch is a 30-year-old community institution. As its tagline states, Pletcher and his team "believed in organic before organic was cool."

Alfonso, 28 and a relatively new organic farmer, is an integral reason his values live on today. Not long before his death in 2021, Pletcher had been clearing a small piece of land for Alfonso, who was commuting an hour daily, so she'd have housing on the farm. His passing accelerated those plans. His daughter, who inherited the business, immediately invited Alfonso to take over. Alfonso and her husband moved into a yurt on the farm, he quit his chef job, and they dedicated their days to figuring out how to continue, and build on, Pletcher's work.

A well-worn piece of paper has hung above Alfonso's desk ever since. Delivered by a member of the Kearsarge Food Hub (KFH), it lists the names and numbers of people in the local food community who could help her. To Alfonso, that paper has been a lifeline and a constant reminder of an organization ready to bridge the knowledge gaps left by her

predecessor's sudden passing. It reminded her that she was not alone as she navigated her grief and the challenges of a farm transition, not to mention a drought and a pandemic.

Supporting local farmers is an essential part of the mission for Kearsarge Food Hub, which has provided a retail outlet and community resource to Vegetable Ranch for many years. While most food hubs aggregate and distribute local food, KFH is a nonprofit that centers education, community engagement, and relationship building— modeling the hope and potential in regional organic food systems.

KFH invites community members into the lives of farmers without romanticizing a livelihood that can be grueling. At a recent "Meet Your Farmers and Makers" event, Aaron Lichtenberg, who started farming about 10 years ago, noted the challenges of land access. Since he leases land, he must adapt to someone else's whims. He used to sell his certified organic vegetables from Winni Woods Farms at area farmers markets and CSAs. Due to a change in land use, he now sells cut flowers and jarred goods made with vegetables from partnering farms.

Highlighting the unvarnished stories of these small farms is crucial at a time when one-third of farmers in the US is older than 65. On a recent fall afternoon that sent Alfonso into the fields to plant garlic, she had her mind on other farmers stepping up to take the reins. "We need to build the next generation," she said.

The garlic she grows is more than a local, pesticide-free, sustainably grown crop. It's a testament to the organic farmers who are building their own legacies.



Photo courtesy of Molly Alfonso

Molly Alfonso of Vegetable Ranch in Warner, New Hampshire, has seen a spike in farmers market attendance from people recognizing the importance of supporting local organic food systems



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We are pleased to continue to bring you quarterly issues of the newsletter as a benefit of your support.

Supporter Spotlight



Photo courtesy of Lily Nichols

Why I Give

"How our food is grown and raised has a direct impact on its nutritional profile, especially the concentrations of vitamins and minerals, not to mention whether or not they contain pesticide residues. I support The Cornucopia Institute because of their work towards transparency in farming."

— *Lily Nichols, RDN, CDE, bestselling author of Real Food for Pregnancy*