



What you need to know about environmentally friendly food in China, and how you and your family can help create positive change. *By Jennifer Stevens*

For most expats, the idea of eating “environmentally friendly” evokes memories of Saturday morning farmer’s markets – canvas bags in hand, weaving through tents filled with fresh vegetables and fruits. The smell of ripe berries permeates the air; proud vendors display carrots still caked in soil, misshapen melons and squash; and the word “organic” is prominently displayed on labels everywhere – a sign of quality and ethical farming.

This scene has become commonplace in Western countries, where

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the importance of local and organic agriculture has been an educational focus for decades. In China, however, the modern-day movement toward eating environmentally friendly takes a different form, one that is extremely complex.

A combination of food safety scares and a lack of transparency are at fault for much of the confusion around the green food industry that plagues China residents. Questions of health have taken precedence over environmental concerns for most families, and uncertainty about where to buy

produce and meat has created a culture of importing “safe” goods from abroad.

So, what does eco-friendly eating mean in regard to food consumption in China? And what can families here do to help develop green food practices? For answers, we turned to some industry experts.

Go local

The attention to “food miles,” or the distance our food travels from farm to plate, was one of the first initiatives to bring energy and emission waste to the public’s attention. As an



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attempt to measure how far food travels before reaching consumers, it is still a basic way of understanding the impact specific foods have on our environment, but it's only one aspect of a much larger issue.

Online grocer FIELDS China's Communications Manager, Shivika Tarika, states that because "the air freight and cross-country travel involved in getting produce to Shanghai are responsible for so

many harmful emissions," the choice to buy local is part of a greater good. According to Tarika, "buying from local farmers with good farming practices rewards them for their efforts and encourages them to keep on improving."

This begs the question: What constitutes good farming practices in China, and what are the bad? Goma Greens founder Christina Freddie moved to Shanghai with this ques-

tion in mind, as well as some reservations about food safety and the lack of local, organic produce. "There's been evidence that farmers use six to eight times more pesticides than the legal limit," she warns. "And at the wet markets, vendors might tell you their produce is from Shaanxi or Shandong, but not which farms they come from. You can't be 100 percent certain of how the produce is treated at the farms, or even how it's treated at the market."

This lack of transparency led Freddie to create her own produce delivery system, with an emphasis on supporting local farmers who uphold the same "good farming practices" of which Tarika speaks. But for Freddie, this doesn't necessarily translate to "organic" farming, which (in legal terms) involves a



Green Groceries

In a city like Shanghai, figuring out where to shop for safe and sustainable produce might seem like a daunting task. Luckily, the following trusted companies make it easy.

Online Providers:

FIELDS

Focused on food safety as well as working with local and certified-organic farms, FIELDS Online Grocer offers a wide range of food products as well as the option to sort for seasonal produce. www.fieldschina.com

Kate & Kimi

Online food provider Kate & Kimi works with Tongchu and Kunshan organic farms, and specialties include sustainable salmon and free-range eggs. The company also provides food from eco-friendly local vendors, like Lizzy's All Natural. www.kateandkimi.com

Epermarket

This online food provider offers a recycling program for customers, with incentives to plant trees with nonprofit Roots & Shoots. Organic and local vegetable boxes are available, and the company has their own OFDC-certified farm. www.epermarket.com

Subscription Services:

Goma Greens

With a focus on partnering with local farmers and telling their stories, Goma Greens offers weekly fruit and veggie box deliveries to your home, from ¥199.

gomagreens.com

BIOFarm

This organic provider offers several subscription services for vegetable baskets, or the option to hand-pick produce at their farm in Pudong.

www.biofarm.cn

Farmonize

Customers can choose the four-to-eight vegetables they eat most, and "grow their own" on the company's land. There are also weekly vegetable box subscriptions available, from ¥1,400 for three months.

www.farmonize.com



cover story



and fertilizers responsibly and within permitted limits."

What does organic really mean?

China does have a national organic certification process, and a rigorous one at that. Hunter Gatherer's Ben Moore asserts that "the rules surrounding organic certification in China are far stricter compared to other global leaders in agriculture, such as the United States."

lengthy government certification process that not many small, independent farms have the means to complete. "I don't use the term 'organic' because there's such low credibility - so much cheating," Freddie explains, citing rumors of fake certifications purchased on Taobao and other methods of cutting corners.

Anthony Zhao, chef and owner of Shanghai hot pot restaurant Holy Cow, adds that the term organic is just "branding," in his opinion. "Organic in China is just ... a very big idea," he says. "I visited a farm a few years ago that claimed it was organic, but in my experience, I saw the quality was tiny. They had the certification, but were actually buying [conventional] vegetables from neighbors."

Due to the ambiguity surrounding the term "organic," many in the local food and beverage industry prioritize relationships with trusted local farmers (organic or not) and honest advertising. "For us, what is more important is our supply chain and full transparency in communicating to our customers where their food comes from and how it was grown," explains Ben Moore, Marketing Manager at Hunter Gatherer restaurant, whose farm is still in the process of undergoing organic certification.

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Tarika believes this advice extends to the everyday consumer; when buying groceries, she advises individuals to "be sure to question the origin of the food and the farming practices followed. To be eco-friendly, you need to be sure that you are supporting responsible, local farmers. Even if you're not buying organic, you need to know that the farmer is using pesticides

There are currently two main governmental organic certification agencies in China: the China Organic Food Certification Center (COFCC) and the Organic Food Development Center (OFDC). The OFDC was established in 1994 by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) - now called the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) - the first Chinese



certifier to be accredited by the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO-65). The COFCC was set up by the Green Food Development Center in 2002. Today, COFCC inspects about 30 percent of all organic farms and enterprises in China.

So, what do all of these acronyms mean? Under Chinese law, organic certification promises that chemical fertilizers, pesticides, hormones and GMOs are not used in any way.

"The road to obtaining organic certification is a long one," says Tarika. "The first step is [for the farm] to replenish or 'clean' its soil for three

years, during which time crops will be grown in rotation using only natural compost and natural pest-control methods. Importantly, the farm must not sell any of the crops grown during this cleaning period." In other words, unless the farmer has multiple plots of land or another business, a substantial savings account is required.

Other roadblocks include the inability to harvest land that is in close vicinity to factories or power plants, and the fact that only the use of filtered water (for irrigation) is permitted. Finally, if the farm meets the criteria, tests are conducted. If the farm passes, it will receive organic certification for one year only, and tests will continue

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every subsequent year before the organic license can be renewed.

"There are many reasons why organic farming is significantly more costly than conventional farming," says Nitin Dani, founder of environmental nonprofit Green Initiatives. Besides the time and startup costs, Dani states that "without large-scale use of chemicals, farmers must spend more time or hire more workers to accomplish tasks like weeding and crop rotation. Additionally, organic farms use compost and animal manure to fertilize their crops, which is expensive to purchase and extremely time-consuming to produce when compared to a fertilizer at a conventional farm, which often includes



Eco-Friendly Dining

Though cooking your own local, seasonal meals is best, sometimes we just don't have the time (or the energy)! The next best thing? Choosing environmentally conscious restaurants and meal providers. Here are five of our favorites.

Hunter Gatherer

With its own fertilizer-free farms (organic certification pending), Hunter Gatherer is a true local pioneer in farm-to-table dining. Meals are designed around seasonal produce, and they use hormone-free chicken from the Natural Poultry Group. **Various locations; www.behuntergatherer.com**

Sprout Lifestyle/Better Bentos

Owner Kimberly Ashton is passionate about bettering the earth through reducing meat consumption and offers cooking classes and food products at the Sprout Lifestyle shop/café. Powered by Sprout Lifestyle, Better Bentos delivers ready-to-eat bento boxes full of superfoods and seasonal vegetables, served in eco-friendly containers. **Sprout Lifestyle: 388 Shaanxi Nan Lu (near Fuxing Lu); www.betterbentos.com**



Saucepan

This healthy delivery service focuses on using local, seasonal ingredients in its ready-made, restaurant-quality meals. The owners are passionate about sustainable farming practices and use biodegradable packaging. **saucepan.co**

Thought for Food

Situated on the ground level of holistic wellbeing center The Living Room by Octave, Thought for Food is a restaurant focused on nutritionally balanced meals, using organic vegetables and free-range meats. They even have their own rooftop garden. **357 Jianguo Xi Lu (near Taiyuan Lu); www.livingoctave.com/food**

Holy Cow

This hot pot restaurant is known for its seasonal, organic veggies and quality beef. By upholding extremely high standards for the treatment and production of cattle in China, owner Anthony Zhao hopes to see a more-ethical and tightly monitored meat industry in the future. **2/F, 608 Xiaomuqiao Lu (near Zhongshan Nan Er Lu); 3356 6100; various locations**



sewage sludge and chemical fertilizer. Farmers are finding it hard to pursue safe and organic farming while catering to the demand and conventional prices."

Holy Cow's Anthony Zhao knows from personal experience how much of a challenge the costs of organic farming pose. "We worked for a year [on our own organic farm] and couldn't make any money," he says. "It was too hard - we spent so much money on it, and had to close the business. We loved the project and did okay, but still not enough to cover the costs."

Season's eatings

Luckily, there are other solutions outside of organic growing that can contribute to a greener food industry. As CEO of M Restaurant Group Michelle Garnaut puts it, "When food is in season, it doesn't need to be grown organically." Garnaut remembers that when M on the Bund opened 17 years ago, "things were completely seasonal, as imported produce was expensive and unreliable." She says this has changed as the country is becoming more affluent, and more and more people want what is simply not available in China. She urges people to eat more like the "grandpa and grandma generation."

The environmental impacts of eating out of season not only have to

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do with carbon emissions from transport, but also production emissions. In order to manufacture food that is not in season, heat and light must be produced in greenhouses, and most food grown out of season also requires refrigeration.

"If you're eating seasonally, you don't need to use lots of energy," says Zhao. "It's better for the environment - and also, it tastes much, much better. In the wintertime, if you eat a tomato, for example, it tastes sandy - it has no flavor. But in the summer, you taste it and it's full of flavor. It's a totally different food. If I can use a small local farm and seasonal food, I will use it."

Kimberly Ashton, owner of Sprout Lifestyle and Better Bentos, points out that eating locally and seasonally is important not only to ensure fewer pesticides and energy costs, but also "so that [our bodies] can adapt to the climate and conditions of Shanghai," she says.

Ashton advises expats to "adapt and eat more like the locals, and not exactly what we used to back home." By swapping bread for rice, omitting dairy and including seasonal greens, she believes we can program our bodies to better adapt to the local climate while simultaneously doing our part for the environment.



Safety first?

While eating organically, seasonally and supporting local farmers is environmentally responsible, Richard Brubaker - founder of Shanghai-based advisory firm Collective Responsibility - warns that "food security and food safety take precedence over being eco-friendly."

Past scandals have contributed to consumer fear, and obstacles to instituting safe agricultural practices remain. "The big issue is that people have lost their basic trust in food," says Garnaut. "There is an enormous amount of small suppliers, making controlling the food supply nearly impossible. Additionally, a lot of farmers don't understand the problems of pesticides, and pesticides are cheap in China."

Consumers should educate themselves and make conscious decisions when choosing the food they purchase, advises Green Initiatives' Nitin Dani. "Ask questions and read labels to find out what ingredients are inside your food and where they come from," he says. "By asking the right questions before purchasing anything and supporting companies and brands that are doing the right things, you are already taking a step in the right direction."

A green future

Though there are still plenty of roadblocks for both producers and consumers in the way of eating environmentally friendly, the country is heading in the right direction. According to BIOFarm Business Development Director Jane Tsao, "China has a goal of 50 percent carbon reduction by 2050, so the government will force many heavily polluted industries to shut down or move. For agriculture, it's the same; they will encourage small farms or sustainable agricul-

ture much more under the national policy." Tsao predicts that this will cause new sustainable farms to crop up across the nation, as well as catalyze a shift in current farming practices by agricultural giants. "We will see more small farms growing in China, while industrial farms will try to shift to more green or organic," she says.

Brubaker agrees that "many of the investments being made and policy changes that are taking place will drive improved sustainability," while Dani says that food transparency has recently been included in China's governance framework to address the concerns of food quality and sustainability - though the framework is still in its infancy, with substantial room to improve.

For positive changes to occur, people need to realize the individual impact they can have while living here, even over a short period of time. It can be as simple as asking local markets and restaurants where their produce comes from, or buying healthier ingredients. "As time goes on, the demand for healthy products will increase, which helps lower the cost of local and organic foods," says Dani. "When the price for consumers decreases, the products become accessible to more people, which further increases demand. The key to ensuring a healthy, sustainable future food system is to ensure that eco-friendly eating is convenient, affordable and easily accessible."

Even by simply starting a dialogue about environmental responsibility, we can change common misconceptions about the food industry in China and work toward a greener future. As Dani puts it, "knowing what you eat and where it comes from may be one of the simplest - yet single most effective - ways to begin this journey." **SE**



Food Tips for Eco Families

1. Eat a rainbow every day. Children's bodies (and yours!) need a variety of nutrients from different sources, and a dynamic diet keeps the earth healthy by promoting biodiversity.

2. Prioritize your consumption in this order: plants, white meat, fish, red meat. A plant-based diet is the most sustainable, while beef is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions and one of the main causes of deforestation.

3. Eat real food. Processed, packaged food contains harmful chemicals and additives. Moreover, eight million tons of plastic end up in our oceans every year. Packaging can harm animals, while smaller plastic items such as microbeads are turning up in measurable amounts in our table salt.

4. Only put on your plate what you can eat. Over one-third of food is thrown away around the world, yet one billion people go hungry every day. Try simple tricks such as using smaller bowls or eating smaller portions at a time to avoid waste.

5. Make your meals engaging. Take your children grocery shopping and ask them to read food labels, visit a local farm and learn about sustainable agriculture or buy ingredients to make a meal completely from scratch. Leading by example goes a long way!

— Brought to you by JUCCEE Eats' Food Heroes (www.juccee.org)