

IT MAY BE GREEN, BUT IS IT ORGANIC?

Independent certification at GCM aims to clear up consumer confusion

BY PAT TERRY

Until this market season, “green” was in the eye of the beholder at Chicago’s Green City Market. Farmers often tossed out terms like “organic,” “virtually organic,” “all-natural” and “sustainable” without any real definitions.

But 2012 is different: All farmers at the 2012 Green City Market (GCM) are required to have one of eight independent, third-party certifications, ranging from USDA Organic, Naturally Grown and the Food Alliance to Animal Welfare Approved. These certifications provide information about a farmer’s practices: use of chemical or organic sprays, antibiotics and hormones, genetically modified crops or feed, grassland pastures and/or treatment of animals.

Raising the “green” bar makes this Chicago market unique. “To my knowledge, Green City Market is the only farmers market in the country to require independent, third-party certification,” says executive director Dana Benigno.

Stacy Miller, executive director of the Farmers Market Coalition, Washington, D.C., concurs, adding, “I think other farmers markets with a mission of sustainability will look to this as a model.”

Nearly half of GCM farmers opted for USDA Organic certification (20, plus one pending), but this “gold standard” is too expensive and too much paperwork for many small farmers. It also means setting aside an unplanted “buffer zone” to protect organic crops from chemicals used on neighbor-



Farmers who want to sell at Chicago’s Green City Market must now have one of eight independent, third-party certifications. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUNTIMES

ing farms.

Two other popular produce certifications are Certified Naturally Grown (nine farmers) and the Food Alliance (eight), while three fruit growers picked the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program/MAEAP. Many dairy and animal farmers chose Animal Welfare Approved (three), American Humane Certified (two) and Certified Humane (one).

“We lost one or two vendors because of certification,” laments David Cleverdon of Kinnikinnick Farm in Caledonia, organic since 1996. “They’re very good farmers, but they just had too much invested in their current setup.”

Joel Espe, Hawk’s Hill Elk Ranch, Monticello, Wis., has no certification for his unique operation, but the nationally known elk rancher is working with the USDA to create those standards.

All told, 44 farmers showed up certified for the summer 2012 Green City Market, selling everything from Daikon radishes and flowers to organic pork and spring lamb, from sweet cider, pears and apples to honey and heritage tomatoes. So did 10 non-certified vendors who buy their ingredients from GCM farmers, where possible, and are selling finished foodstuff — breads and jam, pies, tamales, all-natural sodas, ice

cream, pasta and doughnuts.

Founded in 1999, Green City Market didn’t start out as an official “organic” farmers market. Instead, it was envisioned as a place where local farmers, chefs, restaurants and consumers could make connections.

From a handful of farmers and shoppers, market attendance has soared to near 6,000 shoppers of chefs, Kendall College culinary students and consumer foodies on any given Saturday. Wednesdays are slower, offering a chance to really chat with the farmers.

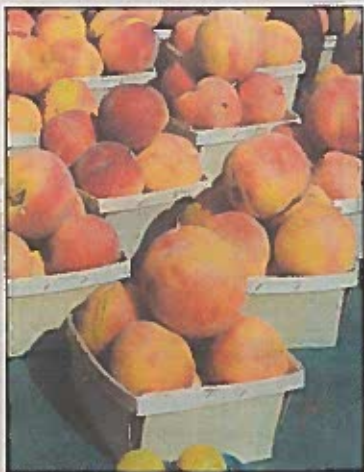
But as consumers learned more about fresh, local and healthier food, they began asking questions

— “Is it organic? Is it sprayed?” — so Green City Market’s board looked for answers.

“We wanted to help clear up consumer confusion over farming practices,” says board member Cleverdon, noting that terms like “organic” and “sustainable” were being used without common standards or definitions.

“So the board thought, ‘Let’s notch this up a bit, and see if we can get all the farmers to get a third-party certification — not limiting it to just organic,’” he relates. “The certification, whichever one, says these farmers have gone the extra mile.”

The biggest consumer concern,



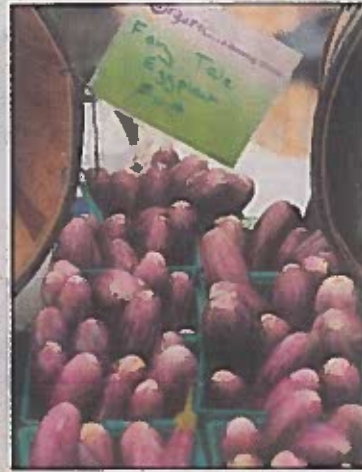
Peaches from Klug Orchards in Berrien Center, Mich.



Cipollini onions sold by Majestic Nursery & Farm in Millbrook.



Beth Eccles of Green Acres Farm in North Judson, Ind.



Fairy tale eggplant is sold by Genesis Growers in St. Anne.



Carrots from Growing Home, locations in Chicago and Marseilles.

say many farmers, is about chemicals sprays and pesticides used on produce. With pork, lamb, beef or poultry, shoppers want to know if a farmer uses antibiotics, genetically modified feed or hormones — and whether the animal has outdoor pastureland.

The 2012 certification deadline gave farmers three years to meet often-stringent requirements, such as administrative paperwork, day-long inspections and sometimes leaving land unplanted to rid it of chemical residue from traditional farming.

Vicki Westerhoff, Genesis Growers in St. Anne, Ill., already had been following organic growing standards so it made sense to be Certified USDA Organic. Westerhoff quit large-scale gardening to raise children, but on her return she saw major decreases in insects and wildlife. Her research put the blame on all the agricultural chemicals used in traditional farming. At the same time, Westerhoff was eating organically to address chronic health issues, but organic food was hard to find. So she decided to grow her own.

Jude Becker of Becker Lane Organic Farm, Dyersville, Iowa, grew up on a farm but his father's health and the farm crisis halted operations in the early '80s. While at Iowa State, Becker stumbled across the organic farming philosophy — “sort of pre-Michael Pollan, pre-local food,” he says. “I was very young, and I wanted to try this.” Becker now produces about 4,000 pigs a year, and opted for organic farming from the start “because it's universally recognized, and built into the legal framework of the USDA. It sets

standards for the whole system — not just animal welfare but sustaining the ecology, preserving the wildlife and the soil.”

Harry Carr of Mint Creek Farm in Stelle, Ill., read Organic magazine as a kid but only began farming 20 years ago, after a manufacturing career. At this point, Mint Creek is certified USDA Organic for pastureland and feed, because Mint Creek's diversity — poultry, lamb, beef, goat and pigs — would require separate certifications for each product, creating financial and administrative burdens for a small operation. Later this year, though, he plans to have organic certification for poultry.

“Organic standards are set up for our prevalent agricultural environment, which is large farms specializing in a single product,” explains Carr. “What we're doing is different — getting the benefit of biodiversity, not only with our animals but our plants growing in the pasture. And we can do this without petrochemicals, without fossil fuels, without plowing, without artificial fertilizers.”

Beth Eccles, a third-generation farmer, runs Green Acres Farm in North Judson, Ind., with her husband, Brent, and earned the Certified Naturally Grown designation.

With Certified Naturally Grown, farmers inspect each other's farms, she explains, “and the growing practices are very similar to organic. We don't use toxic chemicals or synthetic fertilizers, and we try to build up the soil by using compost, rotating crops and using good cover crops.”

Brent Eccles still hopes to become certified USDA Organic, but it's expensive and the paperwork



Denise and Dave Dyrek of Leaning Shed Farm in Berrien Springs, Mich., went for Food Alliance certification rather than USDA Organic because organic “is costly, and it takes so much paperwork.” | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

is crazy. “You have to document everything — anytime you enter a field to use a hoe weeding, pick a vegetable or spray (we use a natural spray). When you're talking about 30-40 acres of vegetables, that's tedious paperwork.”

Dave Dyrek and his wife, Denise, bought Leaning Shed Farm in Berrien Springs, Mich., in 2004, as a weekend getaway from Chicago's Humboldt Park, but Dave loves growing things, and in 2008 they began farming “just to see what would happen.” Today their 80-acre farm is known for its heirloom variety vegetables and fruits. In 2009, their first year at

Green City Market, they knew certification was coming, but Dyrek didn't feel a sense of urgency: “Quite honestly, I didn't know if I was going to do this for more than a year,” he says.

Leaning Shed's certification, the Food Alliance, validates their existing growing practices, Dyrek says. “Essentially we're growing with organic practices, but organic is costly and it takes so much paperwork. I would have had to hire somebody just to do paperwork. I didn't get into farming to write *War and Peace*.”

Pat Terry is a local freelance writer.

CERTIFICATIONS

Even longtime healthy eating fans may be unclear what “organic,” “naturally grown” and other Green Market certifications mean, so check out the following sites as a starter.

USDA Organic

ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop

Certified Naturally Grown

naturallygrown.org/about-cng/frequently-asked-questions

The Food Alliance

foodalliance.org/certification/certificationhome

Animal Welfare Approved

animalwelfareapproved.org/standards

Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program

MAEAP.org/about

American Humane Certified

humaneheartland.org/ourstandards

Certified Humane

certifiedhumane.org

American Grassfed Association

americangrassfed.org/about-us/faq

◆ For a good overview, check out greenerchoices.org/eco-labels and for more about organic growing, sustainabletable.org/home.php.

◆ But the joy of buying directly from your local farmer is the personal relationship, the trust — ask him or her about pesticides, treatment of animals and everything you want to know

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