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The Organic Fable

By **ROGER COHEN**

LONDON — At some point — perhaps it was gazing at a Le Pain Quotidien menu offering an “organic baker’s basket served with organic butter, organic jam and organic spread” as well as seasonally organic orange juice — I found I just could not stomach the “O” word or what it stood for any longer.

Organic has long since become an ideology, the romantic back-to-nature obsession of an upper middle class able to afford it and oblivious, in their affluent narcissism, to the challenge of feeding a planet whose population will surge to **9 billion before the middle of the century** and whose poor will get a lot more nutrients from the two regular carrots they can buy for the price of one organic carrot.

An effective form of premium branding rather than a science, a slogan rather than better nutrition, “organic” has oozed over the menus, markets and malls of the world’s upscale neighborhood at a remarkable pace. In 2010, according to the Organic Trade Association, organic food and drink sales totaled **\$26.7 billion in the United States**, or about 4 percent of the overall market, having grown steadily since 2000. The British organic market is also large; menus like to mention that bacon comes from pampered pigs at the Happy Hog farm down the road.

In the midst of the fad few questions have been asked. But the fact is that buying organic baby food, a growing sector, is like paying to send your child to private school: It is a class-driven decision that demonstrates how much you love your offspring but whose overall impact on society is debatable.

So I cheered this week when **Stanford University concluded**, after examining four decades of research, that fruits and vegetables labeled organic are, on average, no more nutritious than their cheaper conventional counterparts. The study also found that organic meats offered no obvious health advantages. And it found that organic food was not less likely to be contaminated by dangerous bacteria like E.coli.

The takeaway from the study could be summed up in two words: Organic, schmorganic. That’s been my feeling for a while.

Now let me say three nice things about the organic phenomenon. The first is that it reflects a growing awareness about diet that has spurred quality, small-scale local farming that had been at risk of disappearance.

The second is that even if it's not better for you, organic farming is probably better for the environment because less soil, flora and fauna are contaminated by chemicals (although of course, without fertilizers, you have to use more land to grow the same amount of produce or feed the same amount of livestock.) So this is food that is better ecologically even if it is not better nutritionally.

The third is that the word organic — unlike other feel-good descriptions of food like “natural” — actually means something. Certification procedures in both the United States and Britain are strict. In the United States, organic food must meet standards ensuring that genetic engineering, synthetic fertilizers, sewage and irradiation were not used in the food's production. It must also be produced using methods that, according to the Department of Agriculture, “foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance and conserve biodiversity.”

Still, the organic ideology is an elitist, pseudoscientific indulgence shot through with hype. There is a niche for it, if you can afford to shop at Whole Foods, but the future is nonorganic.

To feed a planet of 9 billion people, we are going to need high yields not low yields; we are going to need genetically modified crops; we are going to need pesticides and fertilizers and other elements of the industrialized food processes that have led mankind to be better fed and live longer than at any time in history.

Logically, the organic movement should favor genetically modified produce. If you cannot use pesticides or fertilizers, you might at least want to modify your crops so they are more resilient and plentiful. But that would go against the ideology and romance of a movement that says: We are for nature, everyone else is against nature.

I'd rather be against nature and have more people better fed. I'd rather be serious about the world's needs. And I trust the monitoring agencies that ensure pesticides are used at safe levels — a trust the Stanford study found to be justified.

Martin Orbach, the co-founder and program director of the Abergavenny Food Festival in Britain, owns a company called Shepherds that produces a superb sheep's milk ice-cream sold at a store in Hay-on-Wye. It has a cult following at the Hay literary festival and beyond. Journalists, Orbach told me, regularly report that they have eaten an “organic sheep's milk ice cream.”

The only catch is this is not true. “We have never said it's organic because it would be illegal for us

to do so,” Orbach said. “But it fits with the story of a small sheep’s milk ice-cream maker.”

Organic is a fable of the pampered parts of the planet — romantic and comforting. Now, thanks to Stanford researchers, we know just how replete with myth the “O” fable is.

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