



*New thinking about what we're eating.*

A film by ana Sofia joanes

## **FRESH Shopping Guide**

(assembled by Jeanette Estima)

So you've seen FRESH . . . Now what???

Here are some tips from the FRESH "headquarters":

Every action, big or small, has an impact--this is not an all or nothing situation. Take things one step at a time; decide what is most important to you and start there. You know your life better than anyone else and are the best judge of what you can reasonably do. Act consistently, but be flexible enough to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances (thanksgiving dinner? shopping in unfamiliar markets? overwhelming lust for a Big Mac? etc.). Move at your own pace, making decisions that are right for you and your family.

For example, some of us are most concerned by practices that cause direct harm or suffering to people and animals so we started by paying more attention to fair labor issues and humane animal raising practices. For others, it's more a matter of personal health, and they might try to buy only organic food in order to minimize exposure to toxins. Still other folks work hard to support local food production out of a desire to boost local economy. None of us is right or wrong or better or worse. We each do what we can and try to do more when we are able.

Even with our one-step-at-a-time philosophy, though, there's a lot to think about and a lot of information coming at us from a lot of different places. We've put together some issues for consideration, shopping tips, and links for further resources to help you get started.

### **I. KNOW YOUR FOOD, KNOW YOUR PRODUCER**

Remember, the very best way to know what you're eating is to buy from a local farmer who you trust and can speak with about her or his philosophies and practices. If you don't live near a farm, you can join a CSA or shop at a farmer's market or food coop. If you don't know where to find these wonderful places, try typing your zip code into Local Harvest:

<http://www.localharvest.org/>. Because this site is based on user input it is not comprehensive, but it is a good place to start (and you can improve it by adding your own entries as you learn about local producers and farmers in your area).

**A Note About Small Farms:** Many items at farmers markets are not certified organic. There is a lot of money and paperwork that goes into being certified--and for some farmers USDA standards simply aren't high enough--so although they are actually growing organically, many

simply opt out of becoming certified. Other farmers, of course, have decided to use some chemicals. Ask them! You'll find that they are usually happy to discuss their methods. Many farmers will tell you about Integrated Pest Management, which basically means a variety of methods (both chemical and non-chemical) in a precise and systematic way in order to minimize pests.

Another possibility, of course, is to grow your own vegetables—or maybe even to join together with some like-minded people and start your own little gardening collective, each of you growing what you can, from vegetables and fruits to bees for honey or chickens for eggs. Those who cannot grow or raise anything can assist with composting efforts, labor, or maybe even canning. In many ways, being directly involved in producing your own food is really the safest and most sustainable option. If it's at all possible, go for it!!

- **Prioritize!** Maybe they don't offer everything you need at your CSA or Farmers Market, or maybe you can't afford to buy everything from these outlets. Decide what is most important to you and focus on that. It's ok to buy from a variety of places.
- **Glossary:** [CSA](#), [Farmer's Market](#), [Food Co-op](#), [Beyond Organic](#), [Integrated Pest Management](#),

## II. BUY ORGANIC AT THE SUPERMARKET

That's an ideal scenario, but many of us live in big cities or are otherwise unable to get our food directly from farmers—most of us shop at the supermarket. So, what do you do at the supermarket? The USDA “organic” certification leaves a lot to be desired and in some ways can go against some general philosophies of the organic movement. That's why some farmers opt out of organic certification altogether and refer to their practices as “beyond organic.” For those of us who must simply make due with what's at our local grocery stores, however, the organic label is still often the best rule of thumb. There are a few labels out there that can be more meaningful, but they are not commonly found, especially outside of specialty markets. To get the most bang for your organic buck, however, I urge you to research the companies whose products are stocked at your grocery store and to the best of your ability, buy only from the companies that go above and beyond the minimum certification requirements. For example, Dean Foods, owner of the Horizon label, has often been accused of falling short of organic standards (one recent case in point: <http://www.cornucopia.org/2009/08/largest-organic-factory-farm-operator-once-again-accused-of-illegal-activity/>). Organic Valley, on the other hand, is a farmer-owned cooperative with a strong reputation for its organic practices.

### --- Produce

The organic label, though it does not ensure everything we would like, does ensure that you are eating foods that were not treated with synthetic chemicals (in fertilizer or pesticides, for example) and are not genetically modified or irradiated. Keep in mind that only products that have been certified organic by a USDA accredited certifier are allowed to use the “organic” label. So while there are a variety of certifiers, anyone using the word “organic” should be adhering to the same set of USDA regulations.

- **Prioritize!** Want to eat organic but can't afford it (or maybe your local grocer doesn't carry organic)? Remember, even just some organic food is better, both for you and the environment, than none. Learn the top foods that tend to have the lowest levels of pesticide residue and make them your new favorite foods. By doing this you can dramatically decrease the amount of incidental pesticide you ingest without going over your regular food budget. If you have a little wiggle room in your budget, learn the foods that tend to retain the most residual pesticide and, if you want or need those items, buy them organic. The Environmental Working Group publishes an annual list of the top 12 “cleanest” and “dirtiest” conventionally grown fruits and vegetables. You can download it (PDF and iPhone app!) here: <http://www.foodnews.org/>
- **Restaurant tip:** Don't be afraid to ask your favorite restaurants where they buy their produce. The more they hear their customers ask, the more likely they will be to use local, organic items in their dishes. And remember: Local Harvest is a good resource for finding restaurants near you that do serve local and/or organic food.
- **Glossary:** [Organic](#), [pesticides](#)

### --- Meat & Dairy

This is trickier because there isn't one label or certification that does it all, but organic is still a decent rule of thumb. Organic certification ensures that your meat is from animals that: are fed only organically-grown feed that is free from animal byproducts; are not treated with hormones or antibiotics; and have access to the outdoors.

But if you care about whether animals are raised in accordance with their natural behaviors, “organic” doesn't set this standard. For this, look for “Certified Humane Raised and Handled.” The main concern of this certifier is animal welfare. Interestingly, this does not specifically include pasturing cows, so this isn't perfect either.

Be wary of free range/free roaming/cage free claims: the USDA considers 5 minutes of *access* to the outdoors each day as sufficient for this claim. Similarly, keep in mind that “grass fed” doesn't ensure that the grass is grown organically or that the animals were not given antibiotics or hormones. Finally, this claim is really only meaningful for ruminants such as cows or lambs; if you see it on pork or poultry packaging, it's just there for decoration.

- **Prioritize!** Yes, grass fed and meat is more expensive than conventionally raised meat. If you can't bear the expense, perhaps you can change your eating habits. One way to curb the cost is to simply eat less meat. Choose two days a week to eat vegetarian—even organic eggs and cheese are less expensive. Another way to eat less meat is to think of it as a small part of your meal, rather than the focal point. Stretching a pound of beef or a whole chicken over a couple of meals, for example, might be easier for you than going completely meatless for a few days.
- **Shopping tip:** Know your labels! There is a lot of misleading marketing out there and a lot of labels or classifications to keep track of: organic,

natural, sustainable, humanely raised, hormone-free, no antibiotics administered, etc. Don't be dismayed. Here's a great resource for learning more about the different labels you'll see: <http://www.earthwatch2.org/sustainability/decoding%20labels.htm>.

- **Glossary:** [antibiotics](#), [grain-finished](#), [hormones](#), [cage-free](#), [rBGH](#)

## --- Fish

This is perhaps the trickiest of them all, and there is so much to know in this area that it can be rather overwhelming. But we will say this: First, don't be fooled by the "organic" label on fish—this is a deeply contested issue right now. The USDA has allowed the label to be used for farmed fish that are not fed 100% organic feed, and even fish whose feed contains fishmeal (thus increasing the levels of mercury and PCB's in farmed fish). Another thing: while many of us think that fish is one of the more healthful things we can eat (thanks in part to the herculean marketing efforts of the fishing industry) the amount of harm and destruction we have wreaked on our oceans makes fish extremely difficult to eat in a healthful and sustainable way.

- **Prioritize!** Like meat, some of these issues can be avoided by cutting back on your seafood intake. And like produce, there are some fish that are more important to avoid than others. Finally, some farmed fish is still more sustainable than some wild caught fish. Do your research and decide what you will usually avoid, what you will limit, and what you will eat freely.
- **Shopping tip:** The easiest way to make good choices at the fish counter is to carry around a handy wallet-sized guide that can help steer you towards fish that is low in mercury, not overfished, and possibly raised sustainably. Here's one: [http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr\\_seafoodwatch/sfw\\_recommendations.aspx](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/sfw_recommendations.aspx). Even cooler, if you have a cellphone you can text for information and substitutions while you stand at the fish counter, or download a mobile version of a seafood guide from the folks at Blue Ocean Institute: <http://www.blueocean.org/fishphone/index.html>.

## --- Processed Food

One of the bigger issues to think about when you're buying processed foods is GMOs. The easiest (and cheapest!) way to avoid GMOs is to simply avoid processed foods, since 70% of them contain genetically modified ingredients, while very few whole foods at your average supermarket are genetically modified--beware of that Hawaiian papaya!).

If you do buy processed foods, you can try to avoid the main items that we know have been genetically engineered: corn, soybeans, canola, and cotton. But it is not just these items that you need to avoid, it is all of their derivatives. Here's a quick list: **Corn** - corn oil, corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, corn starch, corn meal, fructose, dextrose, glucose; **Soy** - soy protein, soy lecithin, soy oil, soy sauce, soy isolates, and possibly vegetable oil and vegetable protein; canola - canola oil and possibly vegetable oil; and, **Cotton** - cottonseed oil. Seem daunting? It is.

Avoiding these ubiquitous products when buying processed foods is almost impossible, but buying organic can help here too. The USDA prohibits the use of GMOs in the organic production of foods. Here's another helpful guide, this one lists a lot of the products in your average market and whether or not they are likely to have GMOs:

<http://truefoodnow.org/campaigns/genetically-engineered-foods/shoppers-guide/>.

➤ **Glossary:** [GMO](#), [natural](#)

### **III. BUY FAIR**

The well-being of the workers whose labor brings food to our tables should not go out the window just because she or he is working in a country with lax labor laws. The distance between us and our food makes it easy to overlook the harmful or abusive practices of some companies, but much of this injustice is well-known and documented. Buying items that bear the Fair Trade label is a good way to start supporting fair labor practices around the world. This label is most popularly seen on coffee, cocoa, sugar, tea, bananas, honey, cotton, chocolate and flowers, but is also applied to crafts, jewelry, clothing and other commonly exported products.

Keep in mind that when you pay an extra dollar or two to get something that is certified Fair Trade, you are participating in a system that acknowledges the real costs of production and protects workers and local economies, rather than sacrificing the rights, health, and well-being of workers in order to make a bigger profit.

### **IV. BUY, COOK, EAT SEASONALLY**

We're certainly not used to it anymore, but eating only what is in season goes a long way to cultivating a more sustainable agricultural system in this country. Yes, this means that all of us New Yorkers should give up eating strawberries in February. But, really, there are ways of getting around this. Limiting yourself to strawberry preserves, for example, or strawberries that you grew yourself and froze for the winter.

I'll admit, seasonal eating is not the easiest thing for a novice, but if you live in the Bay area or New York, this can get you started: <http://www.localfoodswheel.com/links.html>. Another thing we have found helpful is a cookbook arranged by season. This can help give you ideas about what to do with the local produce you are seeing at the market, in addition to giving you a sense of when fruits and vegetables are actually in season. Like everything else, start small and go at your own pace. It's unrealistic to decide that, starting tomorrow, you will grow and can all of your food. Instead, how about starting with cutting out berries after their natural growing season in your area, and then moving on to other fruits and vegetables when you've got the hang of it?

The Eat Well Guide is another incomplete but still helpful guide to local resources. Best way to make this more complete? Write to them with local suggestions for the directory!

<http://www.eatwellguide.org/i.php?pd=Home>