Let's Go Organic!
by Brandi Suarez

Becoming a college student means finally having the freedom to make your own decisions, like where you go, who you see, what you do, and even what you eat. Aside from worrying about the Freshman Fifteen, there is also the concern about eating organic foods. You no longer have your parents making healthy food choices, which leaves the task up to you. It is extremely important to be proactive in maintaining your health and one of the best ways is to learn about the truths of organic food. A complete switch to organic is not a realistic goal for college students, as you have much more that takes priority in your lives. However, there are many convenient and inexpensive organic options on JMU’s campus that you may have never known about. Because of the numerous health and environmental benefits, incorporating organic food into your diet every chance you get is a very smart plan.

The production of foods organically is most often compared to the conventional style of production. The overall objective of conventional farming is to produce large quantities of cheap food, whereas the goals of organic techniques are "health of the soil, the crop, the farmer, the environment, and the consumer" (Ronald and Adamchak 14). The table below comes from an article available at Mayo Clinic.com, the website of a nonprofit medical practice group dedicated to diagnosing and treating virtually all illnesses. The article was written by the Mayo Clinic staff, a combination of physicians, researchers and scientists providing the public with their expertise. It compares the techniques of both farming styles, displaying the many dangerous practices of conventional, such as the use of insecticides, herbicides, and antibiotics (Mayo Clinic). These hazardous chemicals not only end up as part of our diet but also pollute the air and nearby water sources, as Singer and Mason explain (204). This poses serious dangers for fish and shellfish living in those bodies of water. Possible consequences for us are also alarming.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional farmers</th>
<th>Organic farmers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apply chemical fertilizers to promote plant growth.</td>
<td>Apply natural fertilizers, such as manure or compost, to feed soil and plants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spray insecticides to reduce pests and disease.</td>
<td>Use beneficial insects and birds, mating disruption or traps to reduce pests and disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use chemical herbicides to manage weeds.</td>
<td>Rotate crops, till, hand weed or mulch to manage weeds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give animals antibiotics, growth hormones and medications to prevent disease and spur growth.</td>
<td>Give animals organic feed and allow them access to the outdoors. Use preventive measures—such as rotational grazing, a balanced diet and clean housing—to help minimize disease.</td>
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Studies conclude that 10,000 new cases of cancer are caused by pesticides each year in the United States and, since "pesticide residues are found three to five times more often on conventional
produce" than on organic, there is a chance that eating conventional produce puts you in danger (Ronald and Adamchak 21). Even though "there is no direct evidence that the very low levels of pesticide residues on conventionally grown produces cause harm to human health" (Ronald and Adamchak 21), it seems best to not take a chance. For conventional production, the EPA allows farmers to use fertilizers made from toxic waste and sewage sludge (Singer and Mason 201). These are definitely two ingredients you don't want to consume. With this information, organic is clearly the best option.

The opposition to organic food can be both global and personal. There is the belief that, because organic techniques are somewhat more tedious and costly than conventional ones, they produce less per acre (Singer and Mason 221). Conventional farming methods use chemicals to speed up the growing process and are better at "wringing more food from less land" (McWilliams 56). If, as some believe, organic methods yield less produce, more land will need to be converted for farming purposes, decreasing the already sparse amount of land on which we let nature take its course.

The environmental concern about the amount of farming land needed is a very justifiable one. Referring back to the goals of organic farming, the health of the environment is just as important as the health of the consumer. However, closely examining the research complicates the easy argument against organic farming. Conventional methods do make better immediate use of the available farming land, but their long-term effects outweigh the problem of needing more space to grow organically. Over time, the pesticides, insecticides, and synthetic fertilizers rid the soil of beneficial insects and nutrients (McWilliams 62-63). This means that, even though the yields are higher, that particular amount of land will eventually become useless and even more land will be needed. Organic farming uses cover crops and crop rotation to replenish the soil and, even though it may need more land at first, make the land useful for much longer than conventional methods (Ronald and Adamchak 17). Another distinct downside to the sped-up techniques of conventional farming is the amount of energy required to produce the chemicals and synthetic fertilizers (Singer and Mason 204). Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium fertilizers must be manufactured using fossil fuel. Ronald and Adamchak report that the production of these fertilizers needed to yield an acre of corn requires "the energy equivalent to thirty pounds of gasoline" (16). Because organic farming does not use any of these fertilizers, they save a significant amount of energy, another reason why organic farming is more beneficial in the long run.

On a more personal note for you as college students, there is the concern that organic food is very costly due to its scarcity and more tedious farming requirements, such as hand weeding and manufacturing organic animal feed. Another concern is simply finding retailers who stock organic food, sometimes a problem for students without their own cars. Last, many people feel that some of the organic items simply do not taste good.

These are all valid points as you decide whether or not to incorporate organic food into your diet. True, organic produce can be expensive, making the complete switch very difficult or even impossible for families. However, as students at JMU, we have access to more reasonably priced--and more healthy--choices. Angela Ritchie, Marketing Manager of JMU Dining Services, describes many of the options available at some of your favorite food stops on campus. Mr. Chips stocks many varieties of Clif Bars, delicious energy bars made from organic ingredients, including Carrot Cake, Chocolate Chip, and Crunchy Peanut Butter. Another popular organic food brand is Amy's Kitchen. Both Mr. Chips and Jemmy's Corner Market carry items made from this family-owned frozen food company. Amy's Kitchen prides itself in using organic ingredients, meaning no preservatives or additives, and home-style cooking methods ("Welcome to Our Kitchen"). We all miss our mother's homemade meals while away at college.
Enjoying Amy's products is one way to remind us of the food we miss while still eating organic. Some of the popular items include Teriyaki, Pesto Tortellini, Brown Rice and Vegetable, and Mexican Casserole Bowls, along with Black Bean and Cheddar Cheese Burritos (Ritchie).

There are also options that cater to those with additional dietary needs, such as Macaroni and Soy Cheese, Pizza without cheese and spinach, and Tofu Vegetable Lasagna (Ritchie). We already pay for meal plans for on-campus dining, so this is an opportunity to eat organic without having to make a trip to the grocery store.

Ritchie also explains the many organic options coming soon to both D-Hall and East Campus Dining. Next semester, D-Hall plans to create an organic station that will serve entrees such as Pasta Primavera, Grilled Italian Sausage with Pasta, and Vegetable Alfredo. E-Hall will begin serving organic fruits, pastas, zucchini, and squash next year (Ritchie). With such a wide variety of organic food at convenient locations, it will be easy to make the healthy, safe choice, especially after learning the negatives of conventionally produced foods.

If you do have access to a car, or a bus, or don't mind a walk, Dr. Mehmet Oz, a professor of cardiac surgery at Columbia University and a proponent of alternative medicine, has plenty of helpful information about shopping for organic food on his website, DoctorOz.com. In one article and its accompanying video, Dr. Oz identifies organic foods you should buy as a first priority: milk, leafy greens, and thin-skinned fruits and vegetables (like apples, grapes, and carrots). If Martin's is too far away, Walmart carries seven different brands of organic milk, including Horizon, Stonyfield Farm, and Stremicks Heritage. While organic fruits and vegetables can be expensive at times, there are frequent sales to take advantage of. As for the assertion that organic food items do not taste good, the only thing you can do is try the available options. It can never hurt to try, and you may be pleasantly surprised when you find items you really enjoy.

The best thing to do when it comes to organic food is to be smart. Understand the truths behind conventionally produced food and the benefits to eating organic. Adjusting to a healthy diet does not mean giving up everything you love to eat, either on campus with the prepared and fresh options already available or coming soon, or off, where you can choose the most important items first, and then continue to work within your budget. Come on: let's go organic.
Ritchie, Angela. "Organic Food at JMU." Message to the author. 5 Nov. 2009. E-mail.