

# KEEPING THE 'ORGANIC' IN ORGANIC

By Sue Jackson

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Atop the veranda roof of an old building in Westgarth, above the proud sign *The Fruit Pedallers*, is a sculpture of a girl in a floral dress with pigtails like aerial roots, sitting astride her orange bicycle in an orchard dripping with fruit. Her basket is crammed with bananas, tomatoes, a cabbage and a pineapple, and we just know, from her ear-to-ear grin, that she's confident it's all organic. We should be so lucky.

That confidence is exactly what is at stake at the moment in the wrangle over the organic standard – a dispute that is dividing the organic community. And as always, if you are a non-combatant, it can be bewildering trying to figure out what is going on.

The bewilderment isn't helped by the fact that the organic sector is particularly acronym-intensive. Key players include the OFA, AQIS and the BFA. I don't know about you, but acronyms have a mind numbing effect on me - so let me start with a crib sheet:

## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

The *Organic Federation of Australia (OFA)* is the 'organic industry information resource for organic food, organic farming and chemical-free food'. It defines itself as the industry's peak body. It recently took the controversial action of requesting that Standards Australia develop an organic standard. OFA is

the financial beneficiary from the Federal Government for promotion of that standard.

*Standards Australia* is Australia's peak non-government standards development body. It has decided to exclude from its revamped standard the stringent requirements on mandatory inspection, certification and labelling that currently exist in the National Organic Standard. Compliance in the future will be purely voluntary.

The *Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS)* is the Government body that utilizes the National Organic Standard to vet the suitability of organic produce for export. It also supports the ongoing development and maintenance of the National Standard and it has proposed ceasing this function when or if Standards Australia releases its organic standard.

The *Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA)* has provided certification services to the sector for the last twenty years and currently certifies more than 70% of organic produce through its two fully owned certification organisations, Australian Certified Organic (ACO) and Organic Growers of Australia (OGA). BFA is a key stake holder with a solid membership base. It is strongly opposed to the development of the organic standard, because as longstanding organic retailer and BFA spokesman, Scott Kinnear, puts it:

'If we launch a standard onto the market that does not require certification then that standard will be misused by people... the release of a standard would see a flood of companies making organic claims without certification.'

The real argument, it seems to me, is therefore about certification, rather than a standard. Should vetting and certification be retained or has the time

come to change to an 'honour' system, where producers' declarations are taken as sufficient proof of compliance?

Some critics of the present state of the industry argue that development is hampered by the unwieldy, unnecessarily complex certification bureaucracy and the 'cottage style' ideology. They suggest the universal standard, by simplifying and streamlining things, will help bring the industry up to speed.

The Sydney-based entrepreneur, Pierce Cody, who is turning Macro Wholefoods into the biggest organics food chain in Australia, is a prominent supporter of Standards Australia's proposed organic standard. He is convinced that mainstreaming is the way of the future. "This 'keep it small, keep it exclusive, keep it cottagey' attitude – it's so, so wrong," he argues. The 8,500 customers who enter through the huge glass doors of his North Shore store every week might agree. But Cath Latham, who with her partner Keith Nunn, has run the beloved community hub, *Fruit Pedallers*, for the past fourteen years has a different perspective:

'An overall uniform organic standard sounds great, but I'm already worried about the way 'organic' is over-used. Twelve times a day people drop things off in the shop saying they are organic. But you can't claim something is organic if it only contains one organic ingredient. That's why it's important to have an independent body assessing the primary producers, pasta sauce makers and bakers. I believe in validation and certification. I (even) like the random auditing.'

What I suspect it comes down to is a fundamental difference of values. If we all lived close to our food producers, knew their names and could look over

their fences to see how the carrots were doing, certification would be irrelevant. We could trust our neighbours to provide us with food they were growing and eating with their own families. Certification evolved because even in the early days of organics very few buyers were in that fortunate position.

And times have certainly changed. Organics is now big business. It is predicted that Europeans will be eating 30% organic by 2010 and here at home consumer demand is increasing 20-30% annually. We also live in a more and more urbanised world, so it will become rare for most people to have a personal connection with their food producers. Rather than decreasing, the need for certification is likely to increase in the future.

The wonderful writer, Barbara Kingsolver, highlights some of the dangers inherent in the under-regulated American system (a system that she suggests has been thoroughly diluted via the influence of big business on Government) -

“In order to maximize profits, some industrial-scale organic producers ... cut every corner that’s allowed ... A chicken may be sold as ‘free range’ if the house in which it’s confined (with 20,000 others) has a doorway leading out to a tiny yard, even though that doorway remains shut for so much of the chickens’ lives, they never learn to go outside.” (*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Harper Collins, USA, 2007, p. 122.)

It’s true the Australian buyer is faced with what can be a confusing number of certification logos. Nevertheless, this self-regulatory system seems to be working. Three years ago the Victorian Government randomly tested fruit and vegetables from over 300 organic stores across Melbourne. Researchers found no chemical residues in an astonishing 99% of the products examined.

Maybe it would be simpler if the customer had only a single logo to consider, but Scott Kinnear is concerned that if products are labelled with a Standards Australia logo, consumers will naturally conclude they have been vetted by Standards Australia when that will not be the case. The customer may be paying an unacceptably high price for simplicity.

The larger problem is that the Federal Government is no friend of organics; in fact it is heavily supportive of genetically modified foods. It is interesting that at the very time when the lifting of the moratorium over GMOs is under debate that the organic sector, a key opponent, is divided by internal strife, precipitated by the proposed abdication of AQIS. At this time the organic sector should be uniting to fight for the retention of the GM moratoria.

It is wonderful for the environment, for consumers' health, for farm animals and for producers that organics is gaining popularity. But the question remains: How does a sector whose philosophy and practices originate in an alternative cottage industry retain its essence when it becomes so big? It would be very sad if it became a shadow of its former self, with a flourishing body but no soul.

Personally, I know what I'd like to do – climb up on the Fruit Pedaller's bicycle (there's plenty of room for two) - and cycle back to the future to see how it all turns out.