

## The Ugly Truth Behind Organic Food

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Swanton Berry Farm is the first organic unionized farm in the nation. (Photo: Jodi Frediani / Swanton Berry Farm)

***The organic labeling standards do nothing to denote how farms treat their workers. Is your organic food a humanitarian nightmare?***

Is it time for a strawberry to make a political statement, again?

I'm standing on a farm south of San Francisco that is unremarkable in that it, like all of the other farms in the area, is a golden canvas of brilliant yellow flowers with the occasional patchwork of verdant greens, early signs of this year's season sprouting up.

It's a slice of California's multibillion-dollar agricultural region that spreads east through the state's Central Valley, down the coast toward Salinas -- America's salad bowl -- all the way to the Mexican border and north toward Oregon. While still a small minority, a growing number of these farms are now organic.

Plenty of people, including me, prefer organic produce because it is healthier and safer. But this certification does nothing to ensure that it was produced with sustainable agricultural practices.

The little strawberry I'm munching is part of a bigger story that begins in the fields and ends on your plate. It's the story of a lucrative industry that offers consumers a commodity at a low-cost but with high consequences.

Forming the backbone of this industry are the oft-forgotten armies of farmworkers who travel California's freeway arteries to plant and harvest crops in every corner of this region. The policies that oppress the 2 million people who grow our food betray its true costs.

Food writer and activist Eric Schlosser, speaking at the Slow Food Nation conference in San Francisco last fall, said that he would rather eat a conventional tomato picked by well-treated workers than a local heirloom variety harvested by oppressed workers.

The strawberry I've just plucked from a neatly lined row of plants was grown at Swanton Berry Farm, the first organic berry farm in California and the first organic unionized farm in the nation.

The Golden State has nearly 1,800 organic growers, according to 2005 agricultural records -- 30 percent of all of the state's farms. And Swanton Berry is in a class by itself, a renegade operation that is bucking the corporate trends of many of its counterparts.

It's a small farm operating on 200 leased acres with 50 staff during peak season. Its products are sold on farm stands, at regional farmers markets stands and some Whole Foods Markets. At first glance, it looks like all of the other picturesque farms in the area, with weathered handmade signs that invite passers-by to pick their own or buy fresh produce, pies and jams from the farm stand.

But inside the farm's store and visitor lounge, the scene is markedly different from neighboring operations. Delicate glass shelves, lined with fresh berry pies, strawberry chocolate truffles, homemade jams and T-shirts (all for sale through an honor-system cash register), also include photos of United Farm Workers Founder Cesar Chavez. Memorialized near the door is the story of the farm's unionization process in 1998. Farm Manager Forrest Cook sits at his computer in a corner below an enormous photograph of Chavez.

And it struck me, why is this place such an anomaly in the organic movement?

The pioneers of organic farming in the 1960s were as eclectic as a bag of mixed greens. For some hippie farmers, embracing organic farming was part of their broader vision and commitment to sustainable agriculture. And, that meant not just treating the land well, but also the workers and animals on that land.

The social-movement component of organic farming, however, has been largely discarded. What's left, to a large degree, is quaint packaging that's strategically conceived and mass marketed to lure consumers into thinking big organic agriculture is really a sustainable mom-and-pop deal. The demand for organics continues to skyrocket, even under dismal economic conditions.

Many organic growers have responded by continuing to expand their operations and behaving similarly to their conventional counterparts. Market forces have also encouraged conventional growers to join the profitable organics movement (e.g. Driscoll's Berries and Tanimura and Antle). Many organic growers are promulgating the status quo in an industry that has kept its costs low by oppressing its workers.

"There's a real clear effort to have a stable underclass by making sure food is cheap," says Cook of Swanton Berry.

The connection between environmental conservation through organic-farming practices and labor rights, has been largely lost in much of today's organics movement.

"Environmental degradation is most often human degradation," notes Josh Viertel, president of Slow Food USA.

"Because farms are organic, people assume that it's an enlightened labor standard," says Michael Meuter, an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance. "But that's not accurate. There are definitely labor violations on organic farms."

In 1998, Swanton Berry's owner, Jim Cochran, deviated from the status quo and approached the United Farm Workers to negotiate a contract. Cochran was committed to a farm that was sustainable, not just organic. He particularly wanted to offer his workers a health plan, but couldn't afford it.

Enter the union, which offers its "Robert F. Kennedy" medical plans for unionized growers at a significantly cheaper rate than if the farm set up its own (\$200 per month per worker). As a unionized operation, Cochran could now also offer pension plans to his workers, in addition to official grievance procedures.

Irv Hershenbaum, a UFW leader, has devoted much of his life to the farm labor movement. While workers on organic farms aren't exposed to toxic pesticides, he argues that they, like their counterparts on conventional farms, work without the basic protections commonly afforded workers in other blue-collar industries. "They are working in the 21st century with 19th century working conditions," he asserts.

Jesus Lopez, a community worker with CRLA, says he hears the same concerns from workers on organic and nonorganic farms. The No. 1 complaint among both groups is that they receive neither state minimum wage nor overtime pay. This in an industry where 30 percent of all farmworker families earn less than \$10,000 a year, and 24 percent live below the poverty line, according to a report by California Institute for Rural Studies. The institute also found that 70 percent of farmworkers had no health benefits.

While unions across the country continue to fight an uphill battle to organize members as numbers decline nationwide, unionizing farmworkers poses an additional challenge, because most aren't afforded legal rights by the National Labor Relations Board.

A 1975 California law offers protections for farmworkers to organize, unlike other states. But, there doesn't seem to be much traction at the national level to expand organic certification standards, which only cover agricultural practices, not labor standards.

The Organic Trade Association, a marketing group that represents organic products is focused on increasing sales and protecting the current USDA organic standards. According to Barbara Haumann of the association, the group "isn't minimizing labor issues, but other [issues] have taken up so much time and energy."

The hostility of many organic growers to labor issues was evident in a 2006 report cited by CIRRS, which found that most preferred to not include social standards in USDA certification. In contrast, says Hershenbaum, "Cochran didn't let his fears prevent him from doing what was best for his workers."

Cook says the union contract has been an undeniable asset to the farm, which sells a popular, high-quality product tended by well-paid workers who return every season. He concedes that workers still aren't paid enough, an inevitable consequence of farmers not being valued in our society at the level they should be.

"Consumers' demand for cheap food limits the ability to pay true wages," he says.

Working within these confines, however, Cook believes the union contract offers benefits that help to make the farm more sustainable ... a step beyond organic.

A stark contrast is Driscoll's Berries, a privately held company that is one of the biggest growers of organic and conventional berries in the world. The company has thousands of acres stretching across California and into Mexico.

It employs 5,000 people to pick its berries, which accounts for a quarter of California's strawberry workers. Its sales total 50 percent of all the state's berry sales, and its products can be found on five continents. None of its workers are unionized.

Organic farmer and activist Elizabeth Henderson says that unionization on large farms is totally appropriate.

"If Tanimura and Antle were forced to pay union wages, it would raise the price of food and be good for small farmers, who could then raise their prices, too," she says. She is backing a Domestic Fair Trade label that, through a certified system, would help make consumers aware of small farms with good labor standards..

"Unless the farm is unionized, workers are almost universally exposed and vulnerable, whether or not the work conditions at any given time are abusive with zero legal support for farmworkers," says Ryan Zinn of the Organic Consumers Association.

"The greatest irony is that the people who pick your food to eat don't have enough to eat," says Hershenbaum, quoting his mentor, Chavez. Not all growers are as bold as Swanton Berry. But as conscious consumers we can demand that more farms follow their lead.