



An Organic Evolution

Want to consume more organic produce, or be smarter about how you choose your fruit and veg this year? Elena Kinane, Founder of Greenheart Organic Farms, shares her wisdom.

Eating green leafy vegetables such as spinach and kale is very important as they're full of nutrients and very low in sugar. However, conventional produce is grown mostly on farms that practice monoculture on poor soil and as such they have to spray the crops heavily to protect the leaves from pests. Imported leaves are also treated with preservatives so they do not wilt and manage the journey. Therefore, I wouldn't condone buying your leafy greens from anywhere other than a trusted local organic source. In terms of fruit, melons and particularly Watermelons are often grown with the help of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which contaminate the water that is stored within the fruit, so they're often highly toxic.

We keep our running cost low so our prices are generally not much higher than most supermarkets. In fact you're really paying for the produce and not the real estate location or excess staff costs. Given that people are increasingly suffering from chronic disease we should go back to investing a little more of our income on food and a little less on luxury goods such as cars, clothes and holidays. In the 1950's about 50% of the disposable income in the Western world was spent on food whereas now it is only 20%.

Imported tomatoes are often harvested prematurely so they can last the journey, then sprayed with Ethylene to ripen so texture is not necessarily an

indicator of freshness. We grow many heirloom tomatoes that have a soft flesh when pricked straight from the vine such as some 'Maramand' or 'Brandywine' varieties, so firmness is not necessarily an indicator of a good tomato either. I think smell is a much better indicator of freshness. Freshly picked, organic tomatoes and their tops have a beautiful earthy smell, which is lacking from conventionally grown, stored tomatoes. When buying root vegetables such as beetroot, carrots and radishes try to choose those with tops. If the tops are wilted or have been cut off you can be almost certain that they're not fresh. Stay away from ready-washed packaged leafy greens, as they 'last forever' and are certain to have been treated with lots of preservatives. When buying lettuce check the bottom. If the stem is dark pink/brown you know that they were not cut on the day of sale even though the leaves are still perky.

Online vs. IRL

It is difficult to generalize [when it comes to whether using a delivery service or actually going to an organic market or supermarket is better), as this depends on the quality of both. Genuine organic farmers markets, as you find them in small rural communities across Europe for instance, are an amazing way to buy fresh produce. You get to speak to the actual farmers and build up a trusting relationship.

However in some places 'The Farmer's Market' concept has unfortunately been abused and has been used only as a marketing tool. The best policy is to ask questions. A genuine organic farmer will be able to answer them confidently and informatively. A genuine organic operation will always try to keep running costs low as profit margins are low. As such delivery services and 'Box Schemes' are a great economical way to get freshly harvested produce directly from the field to the household. If it's the real thing the produce will be as lovely and fresh as it would be at a Farmers Market as, most likely, it won't have been stored in a warehouse before being delivered. The only downside may be that you won't be able to pick exactly what you want. Not all services offer customized options. It can take a few orders to get it right. In general I'd say always buy produce loose. Packaging is there to make it last longer and in most cases it won't be fresh (don't underestimate how long the packaging process takes). However, with loose produce you have to be sure of the source as it is harder to trace it back to its origin.

Keep Things Fresh

Try to eat your produce as fresh as possible. There are many ways how to preserve fresh produce and make it look good for longer but the fact is that nutrients start to diminish the moment the crops have been

picked. Ideally we should all have our own vegetable patch where we harvest 'just in time' for dinner! Unless cared for properly, genuine organic greens will start wilting as soon as they've been picked, especially when temperatures are high. Clean your produce only when you are ready to use it. Washing produce before storing it in the fridge will make it lose shape faster and yes excess moisture on the outside will make it soggy. So keep produce dry but covered. If you store greens outside the fridge you can keep the roots or the bottom end of the stems in water and keep the top covered. All fruit and vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, and courgettes should be ideally kept outside the fridge to preserve their taste but this is not always possible in the UAE, especially during the summer months. Before refrigerators, root vegetables and potatoes used to be stored in boxes of sand in cellars during the winter months. The sand kept them dry, but protected them from oxidation.

If stored correctly, local greens can keep for up to five days depending on variety. Generally speaking unless chemicals are used, oxidation is part of nature and can't be stopped. All fresh produce should be eaten within 1 week at the most. If you think you won't be able to consume everything within a week try to preserve by pickling, making spreads or jams. ■