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Organic Food Consumer: Perspectives from the United States and Turkey

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Organic farming is characterized by crops that have been grown without the use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Livestock are organic by being naturally fed without being given hormones or antibiotics to enhance or catalyze the production process. Another important aspect of organic farming is the presence of non-genetically modified products. The practice of organic farming retains the natural size and true essence of the product. To some, organics are masked by high prices and confusion of personal acquire, however, the effects of being an organic food consumer are far greater than meets the eye, and far greater than individual satisfaction. Organic foods come from organic farms, which are small plots of land that are farmed by families or groups of people. Organic foods are grown, cultivated and harvested in the purest most natural state without over processing. The health benefits of eating non-processed chemically treated foods are great, but the effects on the environment are even greater. The chemically treated processed way of cultivating food has been destroying the land and poisoning the air for the past few decades. If mass farming keeps going on, the impact it will have could virtually wipe out any good soil to plant in future generations. Organic farming doesn't harm the soil and makes it even better each year that it is turned.

After World War II, the use of pesticides, large-scale irrigation, and fertilizer was widespread. The Green Revolution, a project in Mexico in 1944, which was privately funded by the United States, encouraged the development of hybrid plants and controls on chemicals. With so many differing organic agricultural practices from the 1940s to the 1980s, consumers were unsure of what really made their food products 'organic.' To resolve these uncertainties, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) enacted the 1990 Farm Bill, which included the Organic Foods Production Act. With this, the USDA National Organic Program was established to set the standard for "production, handling, and processing of organically grown agricultural products".

Sustainable agriculture was being widely recognized, and organic gardening was endorsed as a way to be self-sufficient and not harm the environment. Today, there are many standards for the organic food market, which regulate the system and ensure the quality of the products. The standards guarantee that certified organic products are non-genetically modified, livestock is given 100% organic food, animals must be allowed access to outdoor roaming and grazing areas, and for a farm to be certified organic, it must be three years since it has used a prohibited substance. These strict standards give organic food consumers in the United States peace of mind in the products they are purchasing.

The organic food consumer is cautious about health and land. He or she lives a selfless lifestyle knowing that each decision being made is not only affecting themselves, but those around them as well as the whole earth. The consumer is educated on sustainability and lives a liberal lifestyle.

While conducting secondary research on the consumer profile of people who buy organic food, a general consensus was found, which happened to mimic the results received from surveys handed out at Ellwood Thompson's. The U.S. consumer is a middle-aged male or female with a substantial income who cares about their body's health and improving their well-being.

In order to create a consumer profile of people who buy and eat organic foods in the United States, we created a survey that asked for gender, age, marital status, and the highest form of education they have received. The survey also asked if they normally buy organic foods, why or why not, how long they have been eating organic food, and if they are vegetarians, vegans, or have a gluten-free diet. We decided to survey customers at Ellwood Thompson’s, which is a local market that prides itself on the quality of the products sold, supports the local farmers and their green practices, and provides food without *paraben*, genetically modified organisms, and high fructose corn syrup in order to ensure that the customer eats only the best and healthiest foods. We surveyed 20 people, and our results reinforced our preconceived beliefs of what characteristics an organic food consumer has. The marketing manager at Ellwood Thompson’s was very willing to let us survey people outside of the store as long as we sent our results back to her so that she could record that the store helped out students from the local college.

The organic food consumers are mostly female, between the ages of 19 and 40 years old, single, and have a college degree. The people who stated that they normally buy organics foods said they buy organic because it is healthier. The major reason why people do not buy organic food is due to the fact that they are much more expensive than the other options. Most of the consumers have been eating organic food for a few years, and surprisingly, we had a few vegetarians and gluten-free eaters take our survey. Overall, the consumer cares about their individual health and makes the conscious decision to buy organic foods in order to better their lifestyle. As stated above, we were able to collect valuable data from 20 local organic consumers, which gave us a better understanding of the consumer profile of a United States’ organic consumer. The data collected from those 20 consumers is shown in the diagram below.

Male	45%
Female	55%
18 or younger	25%
19-40	40%
41-60	25%
61 or older	10%
Married	10%
Family of 2	0%
Family of 3-5	10%
Family of 6 or more	0%
Single	80%
High School (highest education)	10%
College (highest education)	80%
Graduate School (highest education)	10%
Normally buys organic food	65%
Does not normally buy organic food	15%
Sometimes buys organic food	20%
They are healthier	65%
You like to support the local producers.	50%

Because it tastes better.	45%
They are produced in a more environmentally friendly way.	50%
They are too expensive.	35%
They are not easily accessible.	0%
They do not taste good.	5%
Consuming organic food for entire life.	10%
Consuming organic food for a few years.	70%
Just started consuming organic food.	5%
Vegetarian	10%
Vegan	0%
Gluten-free	20%

More than half of the individuals that we handed the survey out to were females. This fits the typical stereotype of an organic consumer. Usually, women do the food shopping for their family or husband, which is true with the results of our survey. 40% of our consumers were between the age of 19 and 40, which is what we would expect because kids under the age of 18 either are not buying groceries for themselves yet, or do not have enough money to afford the more expensive organic products. But, still 25% of our consumers were 18 years of age or younger, so that does prove that the younger generation is concerned about their health. 80% of our consumers listed themselves as single, and only 10% of our consumers listed themselves as being part of a family of 3 to 5, which was not expected due to the high presence of family purchasing he secondary source research that was used. The education portion of the survey proved to be the most predictable segment in which 90% of the participants of the survey had completed education of the college level or higher. In a great deal of the secondary source research that was conducted, education level was a primary factor in the purchasing patterns of organic food. The survey results from the local Ellwood Thompson's Market mirrored what was previously known about the typical United States organic food consumer, and the growing number of organic food consumers around the globe.

Turkey is one of the best-suited countries in the world for organic agriculture. This is not only because of its "ecological and climatologically conditions, but also because of the nation's use of more traditional agricultural methods."¹ When organic farming began in Turkey in the Aegean region in 1985, it only took up a small portion of Turkey's total agricultural land, but since then it has greatly increased. Research done by a graduate of Marmara University says that the number of organic producers in Turkey has increased from 313 in 1990 to 14,256 in 2006. Organic agriculture in Turkey is still far away from being as developed as it is here in the United States, but because of its desirable growing conditions, Turkey will become one of the world's leading organic producing countries. Due to the large demand from the European Union, most of the organic foods produced in Turkey are exported, but there still are domestic sales.

¹ Koc, Dilek. *Marketing of Organic Agricultural Products in Turkey*. PDF.

<<http://ressources.ciheam.org/om/pdf/c61/00800157.pdf>>

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“Domestic consumption of organic products in Turkey is still at its very early stages”², but organic consumers in Turkey still have a unique profile. Turkish consumers see that there is an advantage to buying organic products over conventional products; therefore they are willing to spend more money for this benefit. The overall, Turkish consumer profile for organic products is an 18-30 year old, married female that has a high school education.

The most prominent characteristics that consumers see in organic food are the greater nutritional values and the lower health risk. In 1999, specialty stores carrying only organic food products opened in cities around Turkey, including Izmir, Adana, Antalya, and Bodrum. These stores boosted the consumer demand for organic food, which showed “that Turkish consumers are willing to pay up to a 10% premium to avoid health risks due to pesticides and thus for products with organic labels” (Abay). There are many qualities that a consumer looks for in an organic food product which are categorized as quality, price, knowledge on the production and certification aspects of the good, and the health risks and benefits from such products. Under the quality category, there are more specific sub-categories such as cosmetic quality, nutritional value, hygiene, and taste. For each of these sub-categories, consumers place organic products higher above inorganic goods.

The domestic consumption of organic food products is available to consumer through outlets such as supermarkets, specialized shops, and direct sale. Direct sales can occur through Internet offers, roadside stands, or farmers markets. A large segment of organic food consumers choose the lifestyle because they are environmentally conscious. In light of this, many retailers are creating environmentally-friendly packaging for the organic products so it appears to be more appealing for those target customers. The most targeted market for consumption that the organic producers are aiming to strive in is in the fresh fruits and vegetables market. This target can be achieved through the supermarket and farmers market sales.

Despite the marketing efforts that Turkish firms have put forth, many Turkish consumers simply do not understand or have the knowledge of what organic foods are, and what sets them apart from conventional foods. This is a major constraint for organic food consumption in Turkey, and the most significant issue that organic food firm have to tackle in the near future. In Turkey, as well as in the United States, there needs to be a wider broadcasting message that reaches all consumers, which is more informative and educational on the topic of organic food. The consumers must learn why it is crucial and vital to their bodies and the environment that they purchase organic foods, and make conventionally produced foods inferior.

² Sedel, Akgungor, Bulent Miran, and Canan Abay. *Consumer Willingness to Pay for Organic Products in Urban Turkey*. Izmir, Turkey: Ege University, 2007. PDF. <<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/7872/1/cp070032.pdf>>
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