

## Buying organic foods - Are there favourable dietary consequences?

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**Key words:** foodservice, menu change, meat, seasonal, convenience, frugal

### Abstract

*Recent research in Europe suggests that consumers regularly buying organic foodstuffs follow diets that are closer to healthy and sustainable dietary recommendations. Field observations from foodservice consultancy suggest a similar pattern for so-called large-scale consumers. Here, too, buying and using organic foodstuffs seems to be associated with better diet and better knowledge of foods. This phenomenon was explored by means of interviews with organic foodservice professionals in Germany. On the balance the results show evidence of changes particularly concerning the issues meat/plant-based, seasonal/local, semi-finished products, sustainably sourced fish and Fair Trade. The preliminary study suggests that both behaviour and knowledge of foodservice operators are impacted.*

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### Introduction

Recent research in France and Germany using independent national consumption study data suggests that consumers regularly buying organic foodstuffs follow diets that are closer to healthy and sustainable dietary recommendations (Eisinger-Watzl *et al.* 2015, Kesse-Gyuot *et al.* 2013), thus indicating that following organic consumption patterns may contribute to enhancing health and sustainability (Baudry *et al.* 2015a, b).

Field observations from over 20 years of foodservice consultancy suggest a similar pattern for so-called large-scale consumers, i.e. professional foodservice operations (Roehl, personal communication). Here, too, buying and using organic foodstuffs seems to be associated with better diet and better knowledge of foods. This phenomenon seems to be independent of foodservice operation types. To our knowledge it has not been investigated, prompting us to explore whether the introduction of organic food in foodservice operations changes the food offered and if so, in what way.

### Material and methods

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For this explorative study qualitative methodology was used, specifically interviews with a minimum of 20 foodservice operators. Respondents were selected from a pool of supplier-caterer tandems identified within a larger project. Selection criteria included foodservice operation in Germany, use of organic food for a minimum of one year prior to interview, a certified organic foodservice operation. The foodservice sector was not included among the selection criteria and thus not limited, but, instead open to catering operations in education, care, business as well as hotels and restaurants.

Interviews were carried out face-to-face or by telephone according to a set procedure. The protocol included 12 questions in total, covering three areas: procurement and use of organic foods (6 questions), development of the menu (4 questions), knowledge of food quality and food origin (2 questions). Responses were recorded as audio files and subsequently analysed.

Students of the M.Sc.-degree programme "Sustainability in service management and food industries" at FH Münster University of Applied Sciences were involved in the study as interviewers, which took place in the timeframe from October 2016 to February 2017.

## Results

The complete sample size consisted of 38 foodservice operations covering the South (8), East (2), West (19) and the North (9) of Germany. The main types were restaurants and cafés (11, including 2 with Michelin stars) and catering companies (11: 2 event, 2 institutional and 7 school caterers). The catering companies ranged in size from about 350 meals per day up to 7.000 meals per day. Other foodservice types were hotels (4, including 2 Bio-Hotels), student unions (3), schools and kindergartens (3), a clinic (1) and other (5). Within the sample 28 were certified organic according to German provisions, 8 were not certified (of which 2 had given up certification) and 2 gave no data.

A very large part of the sample had a high organic proportion. According to self-reported estimates, 28 foodservice operators have 60 % organic or more; 18 are fully organic. Two operators estimated their organic use at 30-40 %; for the remaining 8 we have no data. The interviewees of the 100 % organic operations were highly motivated to use organic. Twelve of them stated that they were fully organic from the moment they started their operation. Only two reported starting with a small amount of organic produce and progressing to more; one of these stated the lack of appropriate supply as the reason.

Interviewees were asked whether the arrangement of menus, recipes or meals had changed through organic use, and, if so, in what way. Though 12 were able to respond clearly about the impact of a change (yes: 7; no: 3) for others the answer was mixed and for many a direct answer was less easy than describing the development itself, from which the impact could then be read. The following issues were mentioned by at least 5 respondents in their descriptions.

**Meat (or the converse: vegetarian or vegan fare):** Many foodservice operators laid the focus on vegetarian fare, though their reasons varied from their general philosophy favouring a plant-based diet (2) to simply having more vegetarian food offers without changing their meat offers through organic use (2). Changes mentioned on account of organic use included an increase in the nose-to-tail principle (3), less meat/more vegetarian (2), less use of expensive meat cuts (1) and smaller meat portions (1).

**Seasonal / local:** 8 respondents stated that their menu arrangement and food offer decisions around organic produce are influenced by seasonal and local availability. Almost all allocated high importance to this factor and it was more readily identifiable as having an influence on their fare than organic. In this connection mention was made of the economic advantage of seasonal / local organic procurement and the current importance of local foods to customers.

Semi-finished products: Interviewees stated that cooking from fresh ingredients was important to their philosophy (2) or that they used more fresh ingredients as a consequence of organic use. Others stated that they used less pre-processed products or a lower degree of convenience on account of organic integration (2), one citing price/availability as the reason. This in turn increased the workload for the staff and brought more self-manufacture (2) but was apparently not reason enough to avoid organic use.

Fish: Interviewees mentioned their fish use in the context of organic. Two operators stated that organic fish was too expensive to include in their recipes; six operators stated that they chose MSC-fish for their menus.

On being asked whether their organic use had impacted other food qualities used, 5 interviewees mentioned Fair Trade products and one mentioned using old traditional cereals.

Exploration of a possible impact through organic use was extended to questions about a general increase in interest or knowledge about food quality and origins. Ten respondents gave a clear "yes" in answer while the four respondents that said "no" linked this to their long-standing personal interest and conviction regarding organic food. Details varied widely amongst the positive respondents and included not just a change in interest, knowledge or attitude but also behaviour. Respondents stated that their knowledge had increased, they took greater issue with sustainability overall, they were more critical (discriminating) and had increased the quality standards they accepted for food products. Furthermore, respondents mentioned reading more organic press, visited more trade fairs, considered their development under life-long learning and enjoyed learning new things. Two respondents mentioned now reading scientific articles and two made sure their staff was further educated in these matters. Foodservice operators also declared that they now visited their suppliers, that they worked together with these cooperatively to find solutions and that they had more respect for farmers' work in producing foodstuffs.

## Discussion

Based on the outcome of the exploratory study together with the field observations we find a number of points that merit further research along the lines of hypothesis generation and evaluation. Even though the data is somewhat skewed towards too many fully organic respondents and thus presents more difficulties for an analysis of impacts following organic use, nonetheless respondents described changes in a number of fields typically linked with guidelines for more sustainable diets (Auestad and Fulgoni 2015; FAO 2012), healthy diets (Lucock *et al.* 2014) and also frugal diets (Martínez-Gonzalez *et al.* 2015). We see potential for a more rigorous study design, clearly differentiating between fully organic operators and those starting with an organic share well under 50 %, as well as the use of closed-ended questions targeting specific changes as identified here. Moreover, we see potential to frame organic introduction and use in the professional kitchen context as an instrument for change, linking with the science and practice of change management, as well as with the field of sustainability transformation science.

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