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Food for Thought
Green Goes Into the Black
The rising economy of Lebanon’s organic food movement

By Emily Holman
Though "Lebanon" and "organic" are not words that traditionally would spring to mind together, the times have for a while now been a-changing. "Organic" is hot. For Lebanese who can afford it, it is now a lifestyle choice. Organic shops are proliferating, most major supermarkets now stock organic produce, and the magic word in all things culinary is "natural."

That magic word is also a source of confusion. Just what is "natural?" It certainly doesn't mean organic, though marketers' images of verdant fields do try to suggest that. A natural product is anything that grows in nature — in other words, more or less any fresh produce.

The next problem comes with the word baladi, meaning local, which evokes rural simplicity and increases sales. But a local product is not necessarily an organic one.

Even the meaning of the very word "organic," in Lebanon at least, is hard to pin down. To be organic a product must be cultivated, without the use of pesticides or fertilizers. It must grow in organic soil untouched by genetically modified organisms. And it must be processed without the use of industrial solvents, additives or other chemical agents.

Unfortunately this definition varies by location. Many countries require producers to obtain certification before they can market their food as "organic," and even then regulators define the word inconsistently. In some countries — notably the USA, Australia and Canada — an "organic" product can contain up to five percent of non-organic ingredients.

So far, the development of the organic movement in Lebanon has hardly been simple; while organic produce has been remarkably popular across the US and Europe for some time, its popularity here has taken substantially longer to gather momentum.

"Going organic is about not only the consumer's health, but the farmer's health, and the health of the planet."
— Jocelyne Karkour, registered nurse, LAU Beirut

The organic boom came about more slowly in Lebanon than in the U.S. and Europe. Certified organic products began to appear in the early 1990s, but even by 2007, they made up just 0.2% of Lebanese agricultural production, compared to seven percent in Italy and 10% in Switzerland.

LAU Beirut's registered nurse Jocelyne Karkour, who in Fall 2010 organized LAU's "Think Organic!" event, which promoted organic awareness among the university community, says that even today "most people have no clue about organic food."

The figures associated with Lebanon's organic movement agree that raising awareness is key. Views vary however as to why going organic is a worthy objective. Dr. Rami Zurayk, a professor at American University of Beirut and a prominent writer and blogger on organic philosophy and the geopolitics of food, prizes organic food for reasons more environmental than health-related.

"People tend to forget that the reason for going organic was initially not human health, it was ecosystem health, and so it should remain."

The movement in Lebanon began with the 2001 establishment of BioCoop Lubnan, an agricultural cooperative aiming to introduce organic farming to Lebanon. In 2002 the NGO World Vision Lebanon (WVL), with the assistance of USAID, began implementing a three-year project to support BioCoop and strengthen organic agricultural infrastructure.

This led to the enrollment of around 160 farmers in BioCoop Lubnan, all of whom are now becoming certified as organic by the Mediterranean Institute for Certification (IMC).

BioCoop farmers now cover approximately 471 hectares of land over 61 villages. Five Extension, Demonstration and Training Centers (EDTC) — located in Bsharri, Zahle, Sidon, Marjayoun and Bent Jbeil — assist BioCoop farmers in improving the variety, quality and yield of their produce, renovating their poultry production systems and enhancing access to new technology.

Initiatives like BioCoop are key to the livelihoods of organic farmers, who face greater economic challenges than non-organic farmers. Farming with fertilizers and chemicals is highly cost-effective, and the cost of transitioning to organic, which takes at least two years, is substantial. Organic products need to be processed or milled separately, a significant expense. If organic food production were large-scale, it would be far more economically efficient.

Lebanon now has over 330 organic farmers and 2500 hectares of organic farmland. The trade group Association for Lebanese Organic Agriculture (ALOA) was established in 2005 specifically to deal with Lebanon's "organic" agriculture. The challenge of defining that term and verifying its accuracy and applicability remain.
ALOA aims to become a national platform for the Lebanese organic movement, to raise awareness of organic agriculture within Lebanon and promote organic agriculture on the Lebanese market. One of its main challenges, according to its website, is “to preserve confidence in organic certifications.”

The lack of a national standard has long been troublesome. In 2004, Ali Darwish of the NGO Greenline maintained that only about 40% of produce marketed and sold as organic in Lebanon was certified or even awaiting certification.

Zurayk says that even today the question of the authenticity of produce sold as “organic” is one he “cannot answer.” Soon after Darwish’s statement came the establishment of Libancert, the first Lebanese organic certification body, which works in line with EU regulations.

If nothing else, the establishment of a domestic body has lowered the certification costs for farmers considering transitioning to organic.

Nevertheless, the fact that some farms have been certified according to IMC regulations, others by Libancert or Qualité France, and still others by other international bodies (not to mention producers who describe themselves as “almost organic”) guarantees continued confusion.

Finally, due to close proximity between many of Lebanon’s farms, organic farms risk being polluted by run-off from non-organic farm.

Zurayk surmises that “many people think merely means producing without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.”

In 2008 Lebanese farmers gained EU accreditation and certification to sell their produce within the EU, a significant milestone in establishing trust in the authenticity of Lebanon’s organic foods.

A draft of a Lebanese law establishing a unit at the Ministry of Agriculture responsible for organic agriculture was submitted in 2005, but has yet to be passed.

Regardless of labeling concerns, organic produce has become ever more widely available. The majority of such products, however, are still imported. Caretaker Agriculture Minister Hussein Haji Hassan recently pointed out that “85% of our consumption is from imports,” an astonishing figure considering Lebanon’s agricultural potential.

Imported organic products include vegetables, fruits, bread, baby food, cereals, jams, herbs and a wide variety of food and beverages, while organic processing in Lebanon is mostly focused on production of foods typically used in Lebanese cuisine, such as olive oil, oregano mix, orange blossom water, and traditional...
Lebanese jams and recipes. Novelties such as organic sun-dried tomatoes, capers and pomegranate vinegar are also available.

In 2002 AUB launched Healthy Basket, a program of Community Supported Agriculture that offers weekly home delivery of seasonal produce. Bagbio and Biobox have followed suit, offering home delivery of organic processed food as well as produce.

2004 saw the debut of Souk el Tayeb (literally “tasty market”), a Beirut farmers’ market that paved the way for the equally popular Earth Market in Hamra. Lebanon’s first organic grocery store — A New Earth — soon appeared, offering produce, mozzarella, organic pasta, baby food, ketchup and even beauty products, followed by similar stores such as Al Marej and Beit Al Ayla.

There are other signs that Beirut has begun, however modestly, to “go organic.” Casablanca, a renowned seafloor restaurant in Ain el Mreisseh, serves only organic, local vegetables sourced directly from co-owner Johnny Farah’s farm. And the Women’s Cooperative Association for Food Processing in Wadi El Taym became the first women’s cooperative to offer organic certification.

In spite of such progress, the problem of classification remains. Christine Toms, a partner at Souk el Tayeb, confirms that “people are more conscious about what they are eating and how it is grown,” while underscoring that “many do not know what organic means technically, and they tend to conflate organic and natural.”

The marketability of “organic” in Lebanon is still rooted in associations with a healthy lifestyle, Karkour says. But she emphasizes that “going organic is not only about the consumer’s health, but the farmer’s health, and the health of the planet.”

The economic problem remains. As long as organic farms remain few in number, production costs remain high. Karkour says this is the main reason many consumers have not switched to organic. Zurayk agrees that it is still a “fairly elite” lifestyle choice.

A 2007 UK Trade and Investment report described Lebanon as having “the ideal climatic, soil and water resources — the highest proportion of cultivable land and the most reliable rainfall and river assets in the Arab world — to be one of the most productive agricultural countries in the Middle East region.” If governmental problems are resolved, Lebanon’s agriculture could receive the supports needed to become self-sufficient and reliably organic.

Nascent as Lebanon’s organic movement might currently be, Zurayk says that “the area cropped for organic farming has increased.” And any progress, however modest and incremental, can only be good news.