

How Sustainable is Sustainable

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EXPERIENCE

Sustainability is the word *de jour* in the world of conscience cuisine. Organic is the Holy Grail of woke eating. How much of it is con parading as corn? An agriculturist in the outskirts of Mysuru on a mission to convert his land into an organic farm said it takes at least three years for the soil to be chemical-free. All the food manufacturers who have jumped on the sustainability bandwagon may not be waiting that long. India is one of the largest food producers in the world, following the Western trend of natural plant-based diets, which ironically Indians have had on their plate for centuries. Surya Shastry, Managing Director, Phalada Organic Consumer Products Pvt. Ltd. says, "Sustainability and sustainable farming are more relevant now than ever. For example, we support farmers with compost pits. These practices make their farm sustainable in the long run." Sustainability is now a marketing jargon that includes everything from organic oats to wild honey. Essentially, the word shorn of all its glamour is about responsibility—towards the planet, its resources and the people. Organic food can be an easy con for the unscrupulous: just a few labels and barcodes and you got that perfect lettuce. Even if the product says 100 percent organic, you don't have to buy their

Charmed by chic food lingo, shoppers and diners are rushing to consume fresh and eat healthy. Beware, under that perfect ice rocket leaf may lurk a soupçon of phosphorous.

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

WATCH OUT

- ✦ Read labels properly. 100 percent organic means all the ingredients in the product are organic.
- ✦ If you are buying packaged food, check the place of manufacturing and you will know if carbon miles have diminished its organic value or not.
- ✦ Foods labelled are not necessarily organic and could be preservative-free but might still contain ingredients that are genetically modified.
- ✦ Farm-fresh or local does not necessarily mean sustainable.

story. Indian companies often ignore international standards of strict chemical-and pesticide-free food. This goes for meat, fish, fruit and vegetables. Sustainability goes beyond just using natural ingredients and organic fertilisers. "It includes the entire supply chain of how the ingredients are grown, harvested, and preserved," says Mariko Amekodommo, International Culinary Expert.

So eat locally not because it's fashionable but because it's informationally viable. The hawker selling tomatoes and potatoes grown in the Yamuna basin has more poison in them than a TV anchor because of all the effluents that have been dunked into the soil. Heard about the Fife Diet? It's a programme developed by Mike Small who chomped at the bit at



PROS

- ✦ Genetically unmodified, hence more nutritious and flavourful
- ✦ Farmers work in a healthier environment
- ✦ Fertilisers are created on site, it's climate-friendly and has a futuristic approach

CONS

- ✦ A tough organic certification process
- ✦ No subsidies for organic farmers
- ✦ Lack of special infrastructure
- ✦ Need for specific knowledge
- ✦ Higher costs in the beginning
- ✦ Marketing challenges

carbon-emitting imports available in supermarkets. He decided to devise a diet based on local produce such as local lamb, pork, beetroots, kale, potatoes, leeks and root vegetables of Scotland. But then that is Scotland. This is India. "Farm fresh is more expensive for sure," says Naani Dubey, who has a charming kitchen garden in Sainik Farms, Delhi which she refers to as her

field. Take my vegetables to a lab and you won't find a grain of pesticide." Farmers' markets is now in the urban shopper's dictionary. The conscientious dietopath may well be aware that in the time of their agricultural forebears, there were only farmers' markets. Sneha Yadav's 100-acre Tijara Organic Farm sells exotic vegetables and herbs at the farmers' market in

Gurugram. Foodpreneurs are busting myths. For example, Achintya Anand quit her career as a chef to start *Krishi Cress* in leafy Chattarpur in Delhi 2015, which now has clients such as Lavaash, Le Cirque at The Leela Delhi, Fig & Maple. Together at 12th, and Tres. Every endeavour has a personal story. Sarrah Kapasi, Founder and CEO, D-Alive Health Pvt. Ltd.,

created her company after realising how organic food helped her diabetic father. "Sustainable food is getting increasingly affordable as consumption goes up and packaging technologies are increasing the shelf-life." Many high-end restaurants are getting season-specific. You won't find an apple tart at Masque, Mumbai, in May because apples are for winter. Nor will you find Twice Baked Classic Cheese Soufflé with White Truffle in summer at Pluck, Pullman Delhi, because the white truffle is only available in winter. Restaurants have to tread the price line and food exotica carefully. For example, is a locally grown lamb better than a New Zealand Lamb Rack, which ate up airmiles to reach the kitchen? Chef Sanjeev Kapoor says, "Restaurants that claim they serve organic food won't bluff about it. It's a question of credibility. These are also the places that value



making a difference." One of the challenges remains consumer habits, perception and transition from conventional methods to sustainable ones, according to Prashant Parneswaran, MD, Soulfull, Kottaram Agro Pvt. Ltd. What matters is adopting a lifestyle that is sustainable. As historian Thomas Fuller said, "We never know the worth of water till the well is dry."

