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Is kosher organic food worth the money?

By **ASHLEY SPEGEL**
Special to The CJN

The popularity of organic foods is heightening as health-conscious consumers are demanding nutritious alternatives to what's presented at their grocery stores.

Organic meats have a lot in common with kosher goods, including health regulations and standards, and the two are merging together in an attempt to attract a Jewish market.

Surprisingly, this market isn't flourishing and grocers providing Toronto's Jews with organic meats aren't replenishing their stocks.

"We've been carrying kosher organics for a couple of years now but it doesn't seem like there's a big market for it," said the manager of Hartman's Kosher Meat, who asked not to be identified. "Kosher meat is really expensive on account of the dietary laws that have to be followed. By eating kosher you're eating a healthier product, and organic is higher up in terms of quality and price."

Kosher organic meats double, triple and quadruple in price compared to kosher meats, and the manager at Hartman's argues there's no reason to go organic because kosher is a sufficient and affordable alternative.

"The concept of kosher is that the product is checked for diseases and flaws before it's sold. It's cleaner than other meats and you're already going health-conscious by buying kosher, so why go organic?"

An organic product is raised, grown and processed without exposure to syn-

thetically produced chemicals or fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, fungicides, growth hormones or growth regulators. Meat and produce aren't exposed to harmful chemicals and are believed to be safer, healthier and more nutritious.

Aviva Allen, author of *The Organic Kosher Cookbook*, has been buying kosher organic foods for four years because of her experience working on an organic farm in Connecticut. She's always kept kosher and said adding organics into her diet was a natural step.

"[Within] Judaism you'll find there's a lot of laws and philosophies that are similar to the regulations of organic farming," she said. "Both share the principle which encourages healthy eating and awareness of what goes into your body."

The Jewish laws *Oshek* and *Chovel* assert workers have to be compensated fairly for their labour and they shouldn't be injured when doing their job. Similarly, organic work regulations state that all workers must be treated fairly and be compensated accordingly for their labour.

Shmirat haguf, another law Allen follows, emphasises safeguarding the body.

The Environmental Protection Agency

considers 60 per cent of all herbicides, 90 per cent of all fungicides and 30 per cent of all insecticides to be carcinogenic. Research suggests that if these chemicals are successful at killing living creatures, they can also be harmful to humans.

"The health of your body is dependent on what you're fuelling it with," she said. "I feel it's worth it to pay slightly more for food that's going to be more nutritious minus hormones, antibiotics, pesticides, and that's where I choose to put my money."

Kosherfest is an annual convention held in New York City where vendors come together to discuss the future of kosher foods.

Kosher organics was the buzz of the 2007 convention, and Manny Alter, manager of Toronto Kosher, was convinced the hot topic would generate demand back home.

"The underlying theme of the event was organic, everything from crackers to meats," he said. "However, in New York you can get kosher organic meat easily and in Toronto there's no market for it. It's a challenging market because the kosher meat market is difficult as is."

Alter says the lack of awareness in the Toronto Jewish

community is one reason why organic meats haven't gained popularity. Another reason is price.

"We sell kosher chicken wings for approximately \$4 but the same product that's organic is \$9," said Alter.

Currently, the grocers supplying kosher organic meat and poultry rely on shipments from Montreal because Toronto doesn't have a producer. Since supply and demand is low and shipping costs are high, grocers like Toronto Kosher are no longer carrying kosher organic meats.

"[Buying organic is not] necessarily more expensive, it depends on where you're purchasing it," said Allen, who gets her organics from Ambrosia, Whole Foods Market, and Hartman's. "If you're buying local organic [produce] and you shop at farmer's markets you can get better quality and lower prices because you're taking out the middle man. If you're buying seasonally, it'll also be cheaper."

She says the organic foods at grocery stores are at a higher price because of the intense labour put into harvesting them. Organic farms are small operations where farmers spend the majority of their time in the fields. Rather than a plane flying over a field of crops to spray pesticides and herbicides, the farmer is in the field pulling out the weeds with his hands.

"A lot of people are turned off by the price," said Alter. "I think that if you're not going to lead a fully organic lifestyle it's not worth it."

"I feel a difference by eating organic food," said Allen. "Being able to eat kosher and organic makes me feel good from both angles. It's like a double mitzvah."



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 Toronto Kosher



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