

Is Trust Organic? Whole Foods and Michael Pollan Ask The Nation to Believe In Them

Skot Rogers | Fall 2012

There is a great nickname out there for Whole Foods; some people call it *Whole Paycheck*. It's funny because it can, unfortunately, be all too true. Organic food is by no means a bargain, and while some of it does taste better and contain more nutrients than its conventionally produced alternatives, a large part, if not the biggest part of the draw of shopping for organic foods, is the ability it gives consumers to send a message with every food dollar. Every dollar spent on an organic selection is a dollar that is *not* spent on conventionally grown produce and factory farmed meat. It is a vote, cast at every register, which tells the food industry that all consumers, like food itself, are not created equal. In [The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), Michael Pollan takes a closer look at Whole Foods, the United States' most largely recognized organic grocery store chain, and discusses whether the heart of organic ideals are lost when small systems are scaled up to meet the demand of an increasingly more interested public. While Pollan does present a very fair assessment about the loss of the "soul" of organics in a larger scale system, he fails to thoroughly consider another perspective when looking at what he and Whole Foods both sell: Trust. By doing the research for the consumer, providing a place where people can count on organic food to be in stock, and making a fair effort to source goods locally, Whole Foods does undeniably advance the cause of sustainability.

In chapters eight and nine of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan works on Polyface farm in Virginia for one week, visits Cascadian farm in the Skagit Valley of Washington state, visits Greenways Organic outside of Fresno, California, and visits a chicken producer in Petaluma, California. In these two chapters alone, it is clear to see that Pollan has something that the large majority of Americans do not—a lot of time and money for traveling. His first-hand visits certainly produce a lot of in-depth analysis. All of the trips are carefully detailed, thoroughly considered, and superbly reported. However, all of these trips are simply impractical for a fifty-hour-per-week employee with school and a family to care for. Pollan reviews the operations, makes a judgment on what he sees, and sells books for a profit. And just as buyers at Whole Foods must trust that the company has done *its* analysis of the goods it sells, the reader must trust that Pollan is truthfully reporting what he has seen and that he knows what he is talking about when he provides *his* analysis. This fundamental need for trust isn't really featured in his chapters though; people limited by time and money, simply have to have faith in authors and organic retailers alike. If one can trust Whole Foods to be as sincere and honest in *its* claims as they believe Michael Pollan to be in *his*, then one can shop with faith knowing that company has done its due diligence in researching all of the items they put on their shelves. One can believe that Whole Foods truly is advancing the cause of sustainability.

Just as crisscrossing the country to research farming operations is not practical for most people, walking, biking, or taking cabs to four different stores in search of organic goods is not either. In most grocery stores, at least a small section of organic goods can be found. However, one store carrying organic tomatoes may not have organic lettuce. One store carrying organic dressing may not carry organic chicken. Shopping for one salad could therefore leave a consumer traveling all over for the better part of a day. This is where Whole Foods does fulfill a need and again

advances sustainability; people that can afford it can count on their stores for having all that they need, and usually end up buying more organic food than they would have shopping elsewhere. To suggest that all people, even the well-to-do, have the time and money to visit and shop from local farms or rely solely on local food-cooperatives is ideal, but unfortunately is just not realistic. The current infrastructure just does not create the means for most people. A place like Whole Foods, responding to the voice of the nation's need for this produce, can only bring more attention and investment to the overall cause.

Local food-cooperatives, local farmer's markets, local sections at the conventional grocery store chains, and local goods at Whole Foods all advance sustainability. Whole Foods does a genuinely good job at labeling the source of most of its products, and therefore it is not impossible to know where most items have come from. When a person has the choice between organic corn from Illinois or organic corn from California, the informed Whole Foods shopper would surely make the local choice. While undoubtedly there are exceptions (people who just happen to live near a Whole Foods and have no idea who Michael Pollan is) it is likely that *most* people who shop at Whole Foods are aware of the extreme counter-productivity of buying organic goods shipped from distant places. *Most* Whole Foods shoppers understand that the carbon footprint of some organic foods can even surpass that of their conventionally produced counterparts when the additional soil tilling, additional refrigeration, and additional shipping costs are all factored in. Whole Foods does aim to make a profit. In profit making, the goal is to try to cater not just to most, but to *all*. And certainly, there in the aisles, sit foods from very, very far away. But there on their shelves right beside those imported goods are clearly labeled local items, much more than can be found at conventional grocery chains.

Michael Pollan makes points that absolutely must not be ignored. The idea of “Big Organic” selling the concept of “Supermarket Pastoral” is certainly one that deserves careful consideration. The fact is that the farms and barns cartooned on the labels of a lot of organic goods are misleading, and it is a dangerous path to have too much faith in any one thing. But on the same token, it is also a near impossible feat to live life with no faith at all. It just isn’t practical for every consumer to visit every farm from which they get food.

The good thing is that most consumers of organic food are very skeptical people to begin with. It is that skepticism that draws them out of the conventional food system in the first place, seeing the rampant trickery and overt lies in advertising all over the food industry. Pollan worries that a careful, well-intentioned shopper may be fooled into believing that organics produced on a large scale create no adverse affects on the environment. He fears that organic shoppers may go along blindly believing that the products they buy at Whole Foods are free of any negative impact when they very well may not be. But just as Pollan asks that the reader believe him so as to avoid visiting all of these farms themselves, he must also concede that the average organic consumer simply has very little choice but to trust places like Whole Foods to a certain degree. Everyone must do their own due diligence, the consumer, Whole Foods, and Michael Pollan alike. Everyone must try, in whatever ways they can, to end this unsustainable system and vote in all available forms for a country-wide network of affordable, local, organic store-fronts. In the meantime, consumers must look, listen and talk, but also must put at least some trust somewhere instead of simply giving up.