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Organic Foods Buyers See Safety in Worms

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Organic fruits and vegetables are hard to find in Moscow, and more so since the country imposed a ban on produce from the European Union on June 2. **Vladimir Filonov**

With a national ban on EU vegetables entering a second week, the producers and sellers of organic foods are eagerly welcoming an influx of buyers in hope of winning over new loyal customers.

"Lately we have seen a substantial growth in the number of customers in our stores on Rublyovka and in the center of Moscow, on Lesnaya Ulitsa," said Marina Goldinberg, marketing director at Bio-Market, which offers organic and environmentally safe products.

While evidence of a growth in organic food sales amid the E. coli scare remains largely anecdotal, it is clear that the quality, safety and origin of food is more important to customers now than ever.

The EU vegetable ban, imposed June 2 over the E. coli outbreak that has killed at least 22 people and sickened more than 2,200, mostly in northern Germany, threatens to overshadow talks on visas and other issues at a two-day Russia-EU summit that opened Thursday in Nizhny Novgorod.

Politicians on both sides had hoped to put the ban behind them before the summit. But the Russian government has refused to lift the ban until the EU pinpoints the source of the infection. The EU, which remains mystified by the source even as the outbreak stabilizes, has criticized the ban as an overreaction that violates the rules of the World Trade Organization, which Russia hopes to join this year.

While politicians quarrel, the providers of organic food are looking to profit.

Organic food, popular for decades in the Unites States and Western Europe, found its way to Russia in the early 2000s, as most hip things do eventually, but under many and sometimes confusing labels, including "ecologically pure," "bio product" and "green product." After a dip in demand amid the 2009 recession, the produce quickly became fashionable again.

What exactly consumers are buying can be iffy.

As in the West, the Federal Service for Technical Regulations and Measures defines the term "organic" as products with minimal processing and the absence of genetically modified organisms, preservatives and radiation. Farming without toxic pesticides or fertilizers is also essential.

But unlike in some Western countries, Russia leaves it up to the market to regulate the quality of the food and establish the appropriate standards.

Food safety and food quality often overlap, but there is a distinction between the two. Low-quality products, like a banana that is starting to turn black or an apple with a few soft spots, can still be safe to eat, while a fresh cucumber might have traces of E. coli in it.

"The quality of food is an intimate affair between the consumer and producer," explained Alexander Semyonov, a spokesman for Rostest Moskva, an independent organization that issues food safety licenses.

Food safety for both organic and conventional foods was under government control until 1995. That year both food quality and food safety were demonopolized, allowing a number of certification agencies to arise in the country. Some, like Rostest Moskva, have a good reputation and the trust of consumers, but others were short-lived and undermined consumer trust.

Look for the Worm

It has made sense economically for Russia to avoid expensive substances to enhance growth and improve the shelf life of farm produce. But with increased imports and a lack of clear food safety regulations, consumers have become more interested in what the magic words "organic food" actually mean and where to find such products.

"Always look for a little worm in your food," said Tamara Naldeva, who sells honey at the

Dorogomilovsky farmers' market between Kievsky Station and Kutuzovsky Prospekt.

Naldeva came to the market, organized by the European pro-organic movement Slow Food, to showcase the honey she had brought all the way from southern Russia.

Naldeva helps her husband and son run a family business: They own an apiary near the Voronezh Biosphere Reservation. Naldeva said the business started with just one beehive 15 years ago when her husband was looking into new hobbies. "He started reading a few things here and there and, next thing you know — here we are," she said.

Naldeva also spoke of how difficult it is to find organic food. But she said she usually trusts her taste buds and worms to determine the health value of a product.

"Organic products taste better," she said and, as for the worms, "if you can find one in an apple, it's probably a good indicator that no pesticides or chemicals were used to grow it."

Another indicator of food's quality is its origin, Naldeva said.

Her theory is confirmed by market research. Many traditional Russian products that fall into the naturally healthy category, including honey, nuts, oil and fats, originate from areas of Russia that are perceived as "environmentally pure," like the Altai, Baikal, Bashkortostan and Krasnodar areas. The products have gained in popularity in recent years on the health and wellness market, according to a 2010 report titled "Health and Wellness in Russia" by the London-based research firm Euromonitor International.

Manufacturers are quick to point out that their products are made in a particular region, emphasizing the unique recipes and quality ingredients traditionally associated with it, such as milk and butter from Vologda or seeds and oils from Astrakhan, the report said.

"In line with this trend, companies are increasingly adding ethnic or regional flavors and ingredients to yogurts, bread and other packaged food products," the report said. "Advertising campaigns for such products usually seek to evoke nostalgia for forgotten local tastes and flavors, while also suggesting that traditional domestic foods and recipes represent a healthier option for consumers."

Experts believe that the organic market will grow significantly in the future. Euromonitor International predicts that Russia's health and wellness market, including the organic food market, will almost double by 2014, compared with the 2009 figure. Its value is estimated to reach 9.5 billion euros ($13.9 billion) by year-end and 14.6 billion euros by 2014, compared with 8.6 billion euros for 2009. All of Eastern Europe consumed 20 billion euros' worth of health and wellness products last year.

The Just for You company specializes in delivering balanced meals made of organic products to Muscovites. Every morning, clients receive seven to eight meals delivered in thermal bags. The food is also cooked in-house, and the amount of calories in each meal is pre-counted.

Demand is so high that Just for You opened an online organic food store in February.

"After we saw the significant interest from our clients in organic produce and understanding its benefits, we decided to open an Internet store that would sell organic food under the Just

for You brand," said Anastasia Kovalyova, development director for Just for You.

But organic food stores in Russia, even in Moscow, remain a rarity.

"It is quite difficult to find organic products in great assortment in Moscow," said Irina Pochitayeva, a medical doctor who heads Just for You. "There are two or three specialized stores that sell exclusively organic products. But, generally, major premium chain supermarkets sell only organic dairy products and dry goods. And their choice is quite limited."

Among the stores that sell organic food in the capital are Kovcheg, Ferma, Ulitka and Bio-Market. While expats and well-off Russians may prefer organic stores, most Russians look for organic food at local markets such as Dorogomilovsky. The markets sell mostly honey, milk and meat, not fruit and vegetables.

Pochitayeva said it was difficult to advise Moscow patients to switch to organic food because purchasing it was an "additional financial burden and is time consuming."

"But, if possible, I always recommend that organic products are used because they are a guarantee of high quality and meet the requirements for healthy food," she said.

For those who decide to make the switch, it may be tricky not only due to limited availability but also because it is hard to determine true organic products. Labels are confusing and often do not guarantee that what you are eating is organic.

Certification and Regulations

The Euromonitor International report praised Russia as a promising place for organic production because much of the country has never been subjected to "agrochemical treatments."

But experts and consumers said a lack of conformity between the state's definition of organic and what is actually sold as organic is the main barrier to the sector's development.

In 2009, a number of government agencies and independent environmental and production organizations began drawing up organic certification standards, but their efforts went nowhere.

The government will eventually set specific certification standards that will have to be met by domestic organic producers, predicted the authors of the Euromonitor International's report. But the standards would come as a double-edged sword. Domestic producers that currently export their products and are already certified organic under EU standards may have to obtain double certification, which could be quite costly.

Still, the introduction of officially recognized standards would help to increase the domestic production of organic goods. This would, in turn, help make organic products more affordable, and thereby increase domestic consumption, the report said.

In the absence of such standards, Pochitayeva recommended looking for a special label marking a product as organic. But she cautioned against yielding to crafty marketing

campaigns and fancy packaging.

"If a product's packaging says that it is 'natural' or 'environmentally pure,' that does not mean that it is organic. A 'No GMOs' label in reality does not guarantee the absence of harmful substances in a product but only says that it does not contain genetically modified ingredients," Pochitayeva said.

Certification agencies encourage consumers to take the initiative in their own hands and look carefully at the labels. After all, the government leaves it up to customers and producers to regulate food quality and safety.

Today there are 21 voluntary registration systems for eco-produce, the kind that does not pollute the environment, saves resources and ensures high-quality, safe products, said Alexander Zazhigalkin, deputy head of Rosstandart, the federal agency responsible for companies' adherence to state standards and regulations.

"The guarantee that the product is organic is made by its producer. He also confirms that the product adheres to the environmental characteristics that are part of a voluntary certification system," he said.

"The consumer must learn to read the label carefully. The producer indicates on the label that the product is organic," he said.

Marking products as "environmentally pure" is banned by state standards, he added.

In addition to looking at the label, consumers can ask for a certificate issued in accordance with a voluntary system that confirms the product is organic, Zazhigalkin said.

Organic Utopia

Russians who search high and low on the Internet for organic food often stumble on a place called the Moscow Food Co-op, which specializes in it.

But they are in for a surprise.

Moscow is a town of 25,000 people in the U.S. state of Idaho.

The Moscow Food Co-op, a 37-year-old business, has about 100 employees, 1,400 square meters of retail space, and does more than $7 million in business every year. But when it started, few knew what organic food really meant, just as many Russians today are unaware.

"I don't think very many people had any idea what 'organic food' meant back then — they wanted 'natural' foods and 'whole' foods," said Carol Spurling, an official with the Moscow Food Co-op.

"When we started, it was with just a few people in a tiny store. ... Over the years, we've moved to a bigger location five or six times, each time doubling the space and doubling the staff," she said by e-mail.

She said she could recall at least one person who contacted the store, thinking it was in Russia.

"It might have happened more than once," she added. "We have many followers on Twitter who appear to be Russian."

Possibly, with the appropriate regulation in place, the Russian Moscow might resemble Idaho a little more.

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