

Life & Times

OBJECT LESSONS » ORGANIC JUNK FOOD

When health meets hedonism

Forget tempeh treats. A new wave of organic candy floss, cookies and chips promise guilt-free, green indulgence. But as sales of eco-products soar, some critics wonder what exactly consumers are buying. **Laura Penny** reports

Organic food is no longer the fodder of the crunchier-than-thou fringe. Purveyors of trans-fatty corn-syrup delights, such as Kellogg's and Wal-Mart, are getting in on the eco-action. Convenience items are getting a makeover, being born again in the better-for-you, earth-friendly form of organic junk food.

Of course, even the sproutiest, smuggest health-food stores always stocked some attempt at a snack, be it tofu ice cream, the first wave of the now-ubiquitous blue corn chips or the travesty that is carob. And premium snacks, such as high-end chocolate and microbrewery root beers, have been proliferating for years.

But organic junk unites two food niches — granola and Godiva — in a marriage of health and hedonism, environmentalism and consumerism, virtue and vice. Chains that cater to the green gourmand, such as Whole Foods, now sell organic Pop Tarts and frozen dinners. There are also organic Oreos, organic sugary cereals and many organic incarnations of Kraft Dinner. And you can get numerous organic versions of the four main junk-food groups — pop, candy, chocolate and chips.

The Onion lampooned the oxymoronic oddness of organic junk last year. "Frito-Lay Angrily Introduces New Line of Healthy Snacks" features an irate executive introducing flavours such as Eggplant Ecstasy, snarling, "Weren't Sun Chips healthy enough for you, you goddamn hippie bastards?"

But, as is often the case these days, satire lags behind spin: Frito-Lay has been cheerfully shilling healthy snacks for years. They released Natural Cheetos, made with organic corn, in 2003.

Critics of organic junk food claim this is just marketing greenwash. Marion Nestle, the author of *Food Politics* and a professor at New York University, says: "It is without question a way to give health-conscious people an excuse to eat junk food. There is tons of money in this."

In fact, she says, organic junk "is still highly processed and loaded with calories. Let's give it credit for being better for the environment, but its health effects will be about the same."

Some dietitians maintain that there is no proof that organic products are healthier than conventional ones. Dana Wilkinson, co-ordinator for the Human Nutrition Research Unit at the University of Alberta, declares that she "is not on the organic bandwagon."

Her dismissal of organic junk is blunt: "If it's a junk food to begin with, how do you make it healthy? Why don't you just go get an apple instead?"

If we could comfort ourselves with apples, though,

» The Pure Fun line started with cotton candy. Founder Luna Roth decided to tackle this circus favourite first because, she says, "It's the most poisonous candy on the market — refined sugar, dyes, artificial everything."

» Pure Fun is not just organic, but vegan, kosher and carry-free as well.



» Sure it's organic, but is it hip? Pure Fun uses trendy health ingredients such as antioxidant-rich pomegranates and Goji berries — a staple of Chinese medicine that is high in Vitamin C.

» Organic junk usually tells you how it was made: Potato chips are "hand-cooked"; cotton candy is "air-spun."

» Pure Fun, like many organic producers, uses cane sugar instead of corn syrup. High-fructose corn syrup is arguably public health enemy No. 2 after trans fats.

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Dana Wilkinson, co-ordinator for the Human Nutrition Research Unit at the University of Alberta

there wouldn't be a multibillion-dollar snack industry. Everyone knows that they should cut down on grease and goodies. But it's easier to upgrade to an ostensibly healthy snack than to stop stuffing your gob.

Organic junk food lets us have our cake, or cookies, or candy, and eat green too. Some organic producers are exceedingly conscientious about their environmental footprint. For example, Kettle Foods, which produces a line of organic potato chips, uses their fryer grease to fuel their company cars.

However, much of the organic food available at your local grocery store was produced by the ginormous agribusiness concerns that currently dominate farming. The vast majority of organic foods are imported. According to Canadian Organic Growers, only 1 per cent of the food produced in Canada is organic. The rest

flies here, or arrives in a truck. As Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, argues, large-scale industrial organic farming is "floating on a sinking sea of petroleum."

Another irony of the organic-junk trend is that many of the new products are simply reviving old methods and ingredients. Richard Williams, grocery buyer for Planet Organic Market, says the Canadian chain's top-selling snack is good old-fashioned kettle corn, made with cane sugar.

Pure Fun has been making organic versions of childhood favourites such as cotton candy and lollipops since 2005. "I'm just trying to make candy like it was made 100 years ago," says Luna Roth, the president of the Canadian candy company. "There's just so much garbage in candy. It's not what we do, it's what we don't do, what we won't put in our candy."

Some activists do not care whether people are eating apples or Giddy Green Apple Pure Pops and simply applaud the spread of organics in their many forms. Mega-corporations selling organic does not represent a betrayal of organic ideals, but the extension of them. Major food merchants such as Wal-Mart exert more pressure on the market than small producers can. If the Beast of Bentonville wants organic Rice Krispies, then Kellogg's makes it happen.

Matthew Holmes, the managing director for Canada's Organic Trade Association, has no objection to Big Food combines going organic. "If they're seeing an economic advantage or consumer demand, then we're sending the right message," he says, "and we're going to be able to convert the majority of our agricultural practice to organics."

But there's a trade-off. The

mainstreaming of organics means they are becoming part of the globalized food distribution system — with all the marketing, processing, packaging and transportation that implies.

As vegans are to vegetarians, so too is organic being surpassed by a new ethical eating movement: Eating locally, to reduce "food miles," or the distance between the pasture and the plate. A spate of recent books, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* and J.B. MacKinnon and Alisa Smith's *The 100-Mile Diet*, document the authors' attempts to live solely on local fare.

And as Ms. Smith noted in a recent CBC interview, there's no such thing as a local Mars Bar.

» Laura Penny is the Halifax-based author of *Your Call is Important to Us*. Her feature on consumer culture will appear monthly in Focus.