



ORGANIC WORLD VIEW

Austria leads the field

High in the Alps, the organic movement is on top of the world. A larger share of farmland in Austria has been converted to organic than in any other country — except for the tiny principality of Liechtenstein next door.

This trend can be traced back to the summer of 1985, when traces of the anti-freeze diethylene glycol were found in more than 1,000 Austrian wines. Some producers had added the toxic chemical to increase the sweetness of their dessert wines, and so achieve a higher quality rating.

In the wake of the scandal, 'natural' organic farming suddenly seemed a lot more attractive. And because much of Austria's farmland is too high and steep for intensive agriculture, the grasslands and dairy farms that predominate in this landscape could convert to organic production with relative ease.

The Austrian government has also provided generous support for farmers converting. In 2003, these subsidies totalled almost €100 million (US\$119 million). The goal is to have a quarter of agricultural land farmed organically, says Rupert Lindner, a spokesman for the Austrian Chambers of Agriculture.

There are already more than 18,000 organic farms in Austria, accounting for about 12% of the country's total agricultural area. Neighbouring Liechtenstein's farmland is 26% organic, but this comprises only 41 farms.

Despite this, Austrian consumers are no more likely to buy organic than those elsewhere in Europe. The country imports most of its food, and the vast majority of these imports are the products of conventional intensive agriculture. "Many people still suspect the label 'organic' is just an advertising gimmick," says Erika Karner, an expert on organic food with the agricultural trade group AgrarMarkt Austria.

Quirin Schiermeier

In 2002, North America's appetite for organic produce overtook Europe's for the first time, at least in terms of money spent. With looser rules for certification than in Europe, possibly because the food industry had a hand in writing them, nearly all US supermarket chains now carry at least some organic products. One large chain, Whole Foods Markets, headquartered in Austin, Texas, carries almost nothing but organic food.



The continent's organic tradition stretches back millennia. Aztecs, Incas and Aymaras alike practised all the major methods of modern organic farming, from crop rotation to composting. They specialized in crop breeding, developing hundreds of varieties of maize (corn), potato, tomato, chilli and squash. Internal organic markets continue to thrive in some countries, but have not been well tabulated. And high prices paid in the United States mean export remains the region's principal organic activity.



Germany's organic market took a hit in 2002 after a banned pesticide turned up in organic poultry. But it soon recovered, and German consumers continue to outspend all other Europeans on what they call 'bio' food — spending about US\$3 billion. The British market is roughly half that size, with the Italians and the French close behind. But, per capita, the Swiss are the clear world leaders, buying nearly twice as much organic food as their German neighbours.



Japan remains the primary consumer of organic food in Asia, although its reported market for such products went from US\$2.5 billion in 2000 to a tenth of that in the following year after the agriculture ministry set stricter standards for certification. The rest of the continent produces crops mainly for export to Japan and the West, but rising prosperity, particularly in China, has given organic sales a huge boost since the millennium.

The extent of organic farming in Africa is hard to estimate. Few countries collect farming data, yet many Africans farm organically by default, simply because they cannot afford fertilizer or pesticides. For the most part, only those who plan to export their produce to Europe would bother to have their farms certified. In few cities outside South Africa can certified organic food be found for sale.

Australia has far more certified organic land than any other country. Yet Australians themselves do not much care for the stuff — at least not compared with consumers in North America and Europe — and the market is estimated at only US\$100 million annually. Much of the land is pasture for grazing organic cattle to supply the lucrative beef markets in Japan and North America.

 Annual value of market for organic products in US\$ billion
 Hectares under organic cultivation (% of total agricultural land)

Words: Jonathan Knight
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