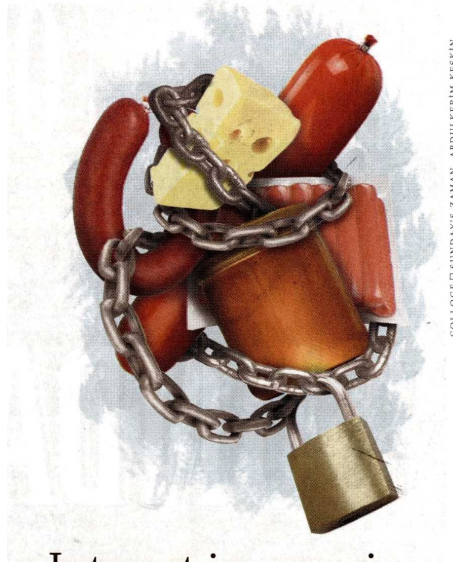




Exposed ingredients give boost to organic food market

Unnerving stories about the adulteration of meat products, fake honey and pesticide-contaminated vegetables have led consumers to lean towards organic foods, which are free of chemicals and are closely monitored in the growing.



COLLORE SUNDAY'S ZAMAN, ABDULKERİM KEŞKİN

Interest in organic products considerably increases after scandalous food stories

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Unnerving stories about the adulteration of meat products, fake honeys and pesticide-contaminated vegetables which have appeared in the Turkish press in recent months have given a boost to the organic foods market.

"In the last two months, our turnover has risen by about 20 percent," Ayhan Sümerli, owner of the organic store chain City Farm, told Sunday's Zaman. It's the same with Sade Organic Products, another leading organic food retail company. Ugur Demirci, a shareholder in Sade Organic, said there has been a 15 percent increase in sales following the appearance of scandalous stories about food products in the press.

Food safety in Turkey has always been a worrying issue for the consumer. And this time depressing stories have really come one after the other: Several retail honey firms were fined at the end of March for fraudulent production after glucose syrup and high levels of pollen were detected in the so-called honey. Then came the news of the adulteration of olive oil, and a Greenpeace report released in March -- though it was immediately refuted by the authorities -- claimed vegetables and fruits exported from Turkey contained levels of pesticides over the permitted limits.

Meat products are no better: In audits carried out by officials, horse-meat was detected in a number of meat products. Other products marketed as containing only beef were found to contain poultry. There is even worse: Speaking to Sunday's Zaman last month, İslam Ali Kopuz from the Istanbul Commodity Exchange's meat products desk said that minced chicken bone and skin were mixed together with beef to produce meat products such as sausage and salami. All this news must have played a major role in leading the Turkish consumer, at least those who enjoy relative financial security, to be more inclined towards organic foods, which are probably identified in the mind with health, which are free of chemicals and which are closely monitored in the growing stage and thus trusted to be healthier.

"After scandalous news articles about food, people now have more faith in organic products," said Demirci, while Sümerli -- who is also the chairman of the Istanbul-based Organic Product Producers and Industrialists Association -- maintained that the consumer identifies organic foods more and more with health. He quotes the consumers: "Yes, organic foods are a little expensive, but we think we do the right thing by spending on food some of the money which we would spend on health in later years." What Uygun Aksoy, professor at Ege University's faculty of agriculture, told Sunday's

Zaman in connection to this is quite revealing. "Should people have major concerns regarding food safety, then organic foods are perceived primarily as healthy foods," she said, confirming that it's food safety that is at the top of the agenda in Turkey. But in countries such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark, where food safety is already of a high standard, most people buy organic products to help protect the environment. In big cities, the number of people shopping at organic markets, which are open once a week and where the prices of most vegetables and fruits are only about 20 percent higher than that of the conventional foods, has also increased. Leyla Ünübay, project coordinator for ecological marketplaces at the Istanbul-based Bağday Association, told Sunday's Zaman that the number of visitors has increased by 10 to 15 percent in recent months. Like many other people from the organic sector, she also believes this is an indicator of people's increasing awareness about the food they consume.

People's preference for organic foods is not without merit. In terms of nutrition, apart from being free of chemicals, organic foods have a clear edge over conventional products. Milk contains both omega-3 and omega 6 fatty acids; however, while omega 3 is known to protect blood vessels, omega 6 has a blocking role. "In the milk of livestock which feed on grass out in the fields, omega 3 is the dominant element in the fatty acid balance, whereas the opposite is true for livestock kept in industrial farms. So, the fat you get from industrially produced milk has a negative quality to it," Mustafa Kaymakci, another professor at Ege University's faculty of agriculture, told Sunday's Zaman.

There is another acid called conjugated linoleic acid which is thought to have benefits for cancer prevention and which is amply present in the milk and meat of livestock feeding freely on grass. "But this acid is nearly absent in conventionally raised livestock," stressed Kaymakci. Noting that pesticides are a major problem in vegetables and fruits in Turkey, he favors the consumption of seasonal fruits and vegetables, which are commonly believed to contain less pesticide residue.

But Kaymakci believes everybody should have the right to safe food and organic foods; however, as they are still fairly expensive for a large part of Turkish society, which on average spends about 60 percent of income on food, they should not be presented as the only way to consume healthy food. "Conventional foods should be properly inspected by officials to allow for the millions to have access to safe food. Are those without sufficient financial means destined to be poisoned by contaminated foods?" he asked.