

New York Times' Oversized Argument: Organic Can't Be Stuffed Inside a Big Food Box

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There is no disputing the claim that organic has become “a wildly lucrative business for Big Food,” as discussed at length in the recent *New York Times* article: [“Has ‘Organic’ Been Oversized?”](#) But what reporter Stephanie Strom has noticeably omitted in her oversized argument is the fact that “organic” is so much more than just the organic processed food industry she chastises. Admittedly, big business wields big influence, and Strom’s article is a sorely needed wake-up call for those who enjoy the benefits of organic to become informed and get active in organic policy debates or risk the weakening of organic standards.

Organic has historically provided seeds of inspiration for farm-related entrepreneurs looking to create their own meaningful job opportunities. Community supported agriculture (CSA) programs of all sizes have sprouted up across the nation along with farm-to-school purchasing schemes, and K-12 experiential curriculum that includes growing and cooking organic food. Independently-owned organic food trucks that sell raw and diverse ethnic foods and mobile organic gardens peddling organic produce throughout neighborhoods have also emerged in response to community needs for fresh food and self-employment. A whole host of organic raw nut butter, fermented foods, and even beer and spirit makers have developed small batch systems for their artisanal organic food and drinks, marketed in their self-defined regional foodsheds. All of this is to say that the evolution of the organic food sector is not linear. It's complex, constantly innovating, and changing — organically.

Even though some aspects of organic are indisputably “supersized,” the issues Strom details with respect to Big Organic do not necessarily extend to the entire organic industry. What she is talking about is the consolidation of the organic processed foods industry which markets its products nation-wide, and oftentimes overseas. These nationally-recognized, big label brands represent just one aspect of the organic foods industry that clearly deserves closer public scrutiny, particularly when considering allowable ingredients in organic food. Processed foods manufactured by Big Organic companies fall along a spectrum of “organic-ness” that varies depending upon the corporate philosophy and values a given company embeds in the products it sells. So, while some organic products contain only whole, naturally-derived, organically grown ingredients and no additives, others incorporate a few non-organic and synthetic ingredients as well. Not all Big Organic food companies support the dilution of organic integrity in their product either, as Strom suggests they do. But, as more and more conventional food industry players buy up smaller organic brands, they are increasingly exerting their influence – some of which is targeted at weakening organic standards to elevate profit margins. Yet, even so, these companies represent only one sector of organic — and certainly not its heart or soul.

The organic movement remains firmly rooted in the soils of small and family farms that strive to continuously improve their organic operations and provide wholesome, fresh food to their communities. It encompasses all of us who want to support systems of production that grow healthy food in healthy soils without the use of synthetic toxic pesticides, chemical fertilizers, hormones, antibiotics, irradiation, or genetically engineered ingredients (See: Tom Philpott's [Mother Jones article](#), which also criticizes Strom and extols the benefits of organic).

That's why it's critical to engage in ongoing policy debates about what's permitted in organic and to familiarize yourself with opportunities to participate in government decisions that affect the evolving meaning of the organic label and USDA organic seal. To understand how organic is regulated, [read the Organic Foods Production Act](#)—the law that provides the foundation for the development of organic standards and the third-party certification system. Visit the National Organic Program's website to learn how the [National Organic Standards Board \(NOSB\)](#) solicits written public comments and oral testimony at its bi-annual meetings (twice a year) to help improve organic standards. And, be sure to stay informed and active in [Center for Food Safety's True Food Network](#). That way, when a company submits a petition to allow a synthetic additive in a processed organic food, it will be forced to answer tough questions about how the substance is manufactured and to justify why the substance is needed in the first place. And, organic

consumers will be listening to those answers and making their own decisions about which companies uphold organic integrity with their food dollars.