

A Happy Convert To Organic Food

By DANIELLE GILLESPIE, *Staff Writer*

I used to enjoy McDonald's Egg McMuffins, Domino's pizza and Dairy Queen hamburgers, typically washed down with a Mountain Dew, Cherry Coke or Dr. Pepper. Now, seven years later at age 28, I can't imagine consuming *any* fast food.

After becoming extremely sick from eating a hamburger at a fast-food restaurant and then reading investigative journalist Eric Schollosser's "Fast Food Nation" during my junior year of college in 2002, I became inspired to eliminate fast food entirely from my diet. Since then, I haven't stepped inside a fast-food chain – well, except to use the restroom on a road trip.

A year ago, I took a step further and changed my diet to entirely organic at the suggestion of Oasis Palisades nutritionist Karen Cohen.

"There are many clear-cut benefits of organic food," Cohen says. "It's not that organic food has some super levels of nutrients. It's just that they are free from the toxicity of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, growth hormones and other harmful compounds. Plus, they retain their nutrients better than non-organic food."

To find organic food, Cohen suggested that I shop at the Santa Monica Co-opportunity (1525 Broadway) and at farmers' markets. I also frequent Trader Joe's and Albertsons, which continuously add more organic products.

The first few trips to the grocery store took me twice as long, and I also had to teach my husband, who was also eager to change his diet, how to shop. I discovered how difficult it is to find food outside the organic aisle that is free of artificial flavoring and corn syrup. I also found that I couldn't purchase the majority of meat at a mainstream grocery store because it is "factory-farmed."

At factory farms, animals are given hormones to promote faster growth and higher profits, Cohen explains. They are also kept in confinement and treated with antibiotics to stop the spread of disease and minimize infections. All of this reaches consumers, like me, in the meat.

Animals at factory farms are also fed corn instead of grass. "You may remember ads promoting corn-fed beef – how it produces the healthiest and juiciest steaks?" Cohen says. "This is not actually the case. Feeding cattle grain and corn is not feeding them their natural diet and it produces fatty beef. Grass-fed cattle are fitter and healthier and produce a much higher quality beef. Grazing on grass is better for the cattle and it is better for us, too."

Now that I have figured out where to find organic products, I actually find it's fairly easy to maintain an organic diet. After all, there's an organic version of nearly every food, even if I want to indulge myself in vices such as chocolate-chip cookies and beer.

Meals also don't take me longer to prepare. For dinner, I may heat a frozen organic pizza topped with pesto, tomatoes and broccoli that is ready in 10 minutes. At lunch, I often toss a salad of carrots, dried cranberries, pears and pecans topped with raspberry vinaigrette. Breakfast consists of yogurt mixed with berries and almonds.

Organic food does tend to be more expensive than non-organic, but even on my modest salary, I can afford it. I think it's worth it to spend a few extra dollars on my health.

Since meeting Cohen, I have learned it's important to have a balanced diet and know what I am eating. I was pretty clueless in my fast food days. I am now consuming pure, natural food and my body thanks me for it. I know, for example, that I have more energy throughout the day.

So why switch to organic? "First, it's better for the environment," Cohen says. "No pesticides mean healthier soil, water and wildlife. Buying organic produce supports small [local] farmers ... While factory farming has limited our choices in the supermarket, organic farmers are resurrecting many heirloom varieties. Finally, organic foods are healthier for you."

8/20/09