


 A photograph of a lush green tea plantation. In the foreground, two workers wearing traditional conical hats and carrying large woven baskets on their backs are seen from behind, tending to the tea bushes. The background shows a dense forest of tea trees under bright sunlight.

How green is your TEA?

Organic products are well received within the coffee market, but what does it mean for tea? AASTA explores the case for ‘going green’.

What does ‘organic’ mean to you? If you’re environmentally inclined or have a particular interest in health, organic produce is often the preferred choice as it is free of synthetic chemicals for which the long-term effects are unknown.

Australasian Specialty Tea Association (AASTA) member Corinne Smith is a firm believer in sourcing organic tea. She and Amara Jarratt co-founded The Rabbit Hole Organic Tea Bar in Sydney. Their brand name clearly states up front what the business is all about.

“We should all be considering buying organic for tea and everything else we put into our bodies,” Corinne says. “The more we learn about what pesticides are doing to us and the people who farm with them, the more we realise we need to minimise them and return to more natural ways of producing food.”

If you’re aware of organics but aren’t too fussed about it, you might simply consider it a fad. The truth is, many of your customers care. Even if you’re not personally invested in organics, you should take a closer look from a business perspective. If there’s one thing the foodie movement has taught consumers, it’s to

look at the origins of food. The focus has already begun to sharpen on produce, and tea and coffee is not immune to scrutiny.

DEFINING ORGANIC

There’s no clear-cut definition for the term ‘organic’, however certifying bodies such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements define organic agriculture as a “production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people”.

“One of the most difficult aspects of sourcing organic produce is defining what we mean by ‘organic’ before locating appropriate suppliers,” says AASTA member Mark Thirlwall. “What does organic mean to both the grower and the consumer? Does organic to us mean no spray, less spray or just no spraying in tea-picking season? Both parties need to be guided by the same principles when it comes to organic.”

The concept of what’s organic often varies from country to country, and even from region to region in countries where there are no legal guidelines. Mark runs Tea Journeys, which takes travellers to tea plantations in China where farmers have been practicing different tea growing, and processing methods for millennia. He says finding out what organic is, is a matter of

understanding the producer terminology that precedes modern developments such as organic certification.

“The Chinese actually had other terms [for weed and pest control] to describe either artisan processing methods or products that were grown in their natural environments without the need of additional growth promoters,” Mark explains. “They also are an instrument to tell us as buyers how local growers had a respect for pure untainted plants, and ultimately tea.”

If you’re looking for a certified grower, start by researching the country’s own organic standards. Also take note of whether there is any organisation – government or otherwise – that monitors the producers on an ongoing basis. If you’re happy with its standard and its monitoring practices, you can then go on to find growers that meet that standard.

The biggest issue is that many specialty teas come from small plantations that simply cannot afford internationally recognised organic certification.

“Certification is the biggest challenge,” AASTA member Corinne says. “Many small producers are growing chemical-free, but the certification process and costs are prohibitive to them.”

Mark says as buyers you need to ask:



A good organic tea supplier will have reputable farms that they have established relationships with.



AASTA member Mark Thirlwall suggests researching a country's own organic standards when searching for a certified grower.

“Could the farmer have afforded that label? Does it necessarily mean better? Does no organic label mean that the product therefore must be laced with chemicals?” In some cases there is even mistrust of certification if the standards are seen as low or not enforced.

For buyers, this means a lot more up front research needs to be done about plantations and growing conditions. This is necessary to ensure the tea at least unofficially meets organic standards, which you can then convey to consumers. AASTA recommends a site visit where possible. Depending on how passionate you are, this can either be a direct visit or via a trusted agent.

WHY BUY ORGANIC TEA?

In non-organic coffee production, even if there is pesticide on the cherry, the hulling process will remove most of the residue, leaving a relatively clean bean. Because tea is made from leaves however, exposure is slightly different.

“As yet, it’s unknown what happens when pesticides that have been dried onto tea leaves are then rehydrated and consumed,” Corinne says. “It’s better to avoid the risk if you can.”

She suspects many cafés choose organic because it makes for good marketing, although for Rabbit Hole, Corinne says the produce is central to the business’s ethos. “Choosing to go organic should be a decision based on personal and professional ethics and standards,” Corinne says.

Admittedly, organic tea does take more effort to source. While a Google search is often a good start, “word of mouth is golden”. Finding a good supplier will also take a load off your plate.

“You need to find a good supplier who

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has done all the hard work for you. A good supplier will have reputable farms that they have established relationships with,” Corinne says.

Another thing to remember is that not all good tea is organic, and not all organic tea is good. Keep in mind that you’re ultimately after a good product that customers will want to drink.

A good supplier will look after that aspect too, Corinne says. “They will know which season’s harvest is worth drinking and which isn’t, and they will steer you in the right direction if you’re feeling overwhelmed by the choices.”

Lastly, in many cafés there’s a prevailing reluctance to switch to organic because of the higher costs involved. This is a perception Corinne wants to change.

“Generally organic tea is slightly more expensive to buy outright, but you need to put this in perspective – we’re still talking about just a few cents per cup, plus the added health benefits for the drinker, not to mention the person growing the tea,” she says. “We need to stop looking at just the bottom line and take in the bigger picture on these things.”

This article is brought to you by the Australasian Specialty Tea Association (www.aasta.asn.au), which is devoted to providing BeanScene readers with advice on how to promote tea.

STAMP OF APPROVAL

To certify or not to certify? The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) is the only international umbrella organisation representing the organic world. It has some 800 affiliates in 118 countries. The IFOAM Family of Standards (see www.ifoam.bio) lists the approved organisations on each continent that uphold its standards of organic agriculture.

If you’re looking to buy tea that is already certified, you will need to contact an IFOAM-approved organisation in the grower’s country.

Be aware that importers and wholesalers may also require certification if the tea is to be processed and/or packaged in Australia, as equipment needs to meet the organic standards of the certifying body as well.

“I think [serving certified organic tea] depends on how important ‘organic’ really is to you,” AASTA member Corinne says. “If it’s top priority then there’s no other way to go but certification. But if it’s for personal use and you’re prepared to take a chance that it may not actually be wholly organic, then you might be prepared to try it.”