



Rising Demand for Organic Breads

With nutrition advice coming at them from left and right, it's all a consumer can do these days to find a food they can feel good about—any food—and stick with it. And yet over the years, through the ups and downs and ins and outs of fashion, one item has stood the test of time: honest-to-goodness bread. Nothing more reliably calls to mind wholesome, natural sustenance, and that's all the more true now that consumers are looking for whole grain, artisanal and organic breads like never before.

They're not just looking in the health-food markets, either. Riding the same wave that carried whole wheat white bread to grocery stores nationwide, organics have found safe harbor in mainstream shopping carts, as well. And the U.S. market is set for strong growth over the next five years, according to a new report by Mintel, which values the organic food market at approximately \$3.6 billion in 2006—more than double the \$1.5 billion organics garnered in 2001. The report estimates the organics market to grow another 44% from 2006 to 2011.

According to the Organic Trade Association, "The principal guidelines for organic production are to use materials and practices that enhance the ecological balance of natural systems and that integrate the parts of the farming system into an ecological whole." The current federal regulations allow four labeling options: 100% organic, organic (wherein at least 95% of the ingredients by weight, excluding water and salt, are organic), made with organic (with 70% to 95% organic ingredients), and a fourth option that lets products that contain lower levels of organic ingredients list those ingredients on the ingredient panel.

But despite their "back-to-basics" appeal, organic, artisanal breads are anything but. They require a dedication to craft and savvy processing that earns them their premium reputation—and price. Nevertheless, as the audience for these products grows, so too do the expertise and ingredient selection available to produce them. "We offer a broad line of organic flours, including organic Ultragrain. If our customers demand it, we can supply it," says Richard Charpentier, food technologist, ConAgra Mills, Omaha, NE, "And the great thing about these specialty flours is that their utility goes beyond just specialty baked goods."

Charpentier suggests incorporating them into a range of products, from breads and croissants to pizza crusts. And as for performance, the difference between conventional flour and an organic one need not be any more dramatic than the presence of that little USDA certified-organic seal on the sack. In fact, Charpentier notes, "Unless a baker was getting a flour with ascorbic acid or potassium bromate added to it," he may not notice any difference at all.

Yet while switching to organic flour may not raise processing challenges, other formulation changes needed to comply with organic standards may. Many functional ingredients common to baking are hard to come by in organic form. For example, bakers may find that they'll need to forgo synthetic dough conditioners and other processing aids in order to abide by the regulations. "If there's an ingredient you need for production, and there's no organic equivalent, you can petition to have it approved as organic," Charpentier offers. But in the end, if a conventional ingredient doesn't get the go-ahead on the National List of Allowed and Prohibited Substances, you may want to start entertaining other options.

Nevertheless, as the demand for organic products grows, achieving that sought-after label may be worth any snags reformulation brings. Not only is the category expanding, but its devotees are willing to pay a pretty price for products that fit their environmental ideals and label standards.