

FairPrice widens organic choices

Supermart's house-brand organic products include more Asian varieties of veggies

By Huang Lijie

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Pasar Organic's greens are certified organic and come from six farms in Thailand. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

Buying and eating organic produce here used to be for the health-conscious with deep pockets.

This lifestyle, however, has taken root in the heartland with the launch of Pasar Organic, a line of house-brand organic products by supermarket chain leader NTUC FairPrice.

This is welcome news to home cooks as the range of organic greens available had previously been more suited to the Western diet, such as artichokes and salad leaves.

Asian greens grown without pesticides or chemicals have been available at the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre and supermarkets such as Shop N Save and Cold Storage since last March.

But most of it is categorised as 'organically-grown', which means its organic quality is not authenticated; or as 'organic in conversion', which means the produce is in the process of being certified.

Pasar Organic greens come from six farms in Thailand, each between 10 and 20ha, which are exclusive contract growers for FairPrice.

It is certified organic by Thailand's department of agriculture, which observes international guidelines set by the Germany-based International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements.

Hence, Pasar Organic produce cost marginally more than those that are organically-grown. For example, a 200g pack of Pasar Organic chye sim costs \$2.10, the same price as a 220g pack of organic-in-conversion house-brand chye sim at Cold Storage. At Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, a 250g pack of organically-grown chye sim from wholesaler Zenxin Agri-Organic Food sells for just \$1.89.

This organic push by the largest supermarket chain here with more than 80 outlets comes at a time when the organic lifestyle is becoming increasingly popular.

According to a survey by the Nielsen company last year, more than four in 10 Singaporeans buy organic fruits and vegetables some of the time, with 12 per cent buying them regularly.

For FairPrice, this translated into a 20 per cent increase in sales of organic products from 2006 to last year .

Mr Tng Ah Yiam, FairPrice's director of integrated purchasing, says: 'When we introduced organic produce to our stores in 2002, we sold less than a million tonnes of it. Now, its volume has increased to a few million tonnes.'

To woo consumer spending and further reassure customers of the integrity of its organic produce, FairPrice spent two years establishing the NTUC FairPrice Organic Assurance Programme.

The programme is a set of production standards independently audited by **AgriFood Technologies**, a private subsidiary of the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, the food safety regulatory body here. It complies with organic production guidelines set by international food safety agencies such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission and International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements.

Mr Tng declines to reveal the cost of setting up Pasar Organic, although he says that it is a 'substantial' amount.

The organic range is now available at 10 FairPrice outlets, including its two hypermarkets in Ang Mo Kio Hub and Hougang Point and two Finest stores in Bukit Timah Plaza and Thomson Plaza. It will be introduced to more stores by the end of the year.

The launch of Pasar Organic has brought cheer to organic food fans.

Lecturer Lau Kia Hwa, 53, says: 'My wife and I have been eating organic food for 10 years now, but our diet is not fully organic because organic produce is expensive. Pasar Organic's cheaper range is good news.'

Housewife Apple Wong, in her late 30s, who buys organic products from different outlets, adds: 'I get a good discount at Zenxin when I buy certain produce, such as its apples in bulk, which I share with my friends. Pasar Organic means I have one more option.'

Organic retailers are also encouraged by the presence of Pasar Organic.

Ms Tuyet Nguyen, 34, managing director of organic grocer L'Organic in Dempsey Road, says: 'Our organic produce range features mostly Western varieties such as silver beets and rainbow chard from Australia, New Zealand and Europe, so the Pasar Organic line is a good complement.'

Mr Tai Seng Yee, 25, director of Zenxin, adds: 'Although the organic food market is growing, it is still fairly niche, so Pasar Organic's launch will help to raise awareness and boost the industry as a whole.'

What's the difference
Here's the difference between organic, organically-grown and organic-in-conversion produce. Organic: The label certifies that the crops are grown using organic farming practices, such as not using pesticides and artificial chemicals, while sustaining living ecological systems on the farm. Also, the entire organic process, from growing to when the products hit the shelves, is authenticated. Organically-grown: The crops are grown using organic farming practices, such as not using pesticides and artificial chemicals, but it may not adhere to organic farming principles which call for the living ecological systems on the farm to be sustained. The entire process, from growing to when the produce hits stores, is not audited to ensure its organic integrity. Organic-in-conversion: These are organically-grown produce that are pending full certification as being 'organic'.

lijie@sph.com.sg