

THE SLOW GROWTH OF *organics*

Organic food is not as abundant in Spanish shops as you might think.

Steve Tallantyre delves into the market to explain how to find it.

Many people arrive in Spain dreaming of food. The term 'Mediterranean diet' conjures up images of fresh, healthy ingredients, grown according to seasonality and tradition. The news that Spain has overtaken Italy as Europe's top producer of organic food only supports this idyllic vision.

The dream, however, rarely survives the newcomer's first trip to the shops; despite the amount of organic food grown in Spain, it is almost impossible to buy in many areas of the country. Even in major cities, it is generally relegated to specialist stores and tiny corners of upmarket food retailers. What's going on?

Organic food, generally described as food grown or produced without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, has become a staple for health-conscious or environmentally-concerned shoppers. UK supermarkets now routinely offer products labelled as organic across their entire range, from tinned goods to fresh vegetables. Organic baby food is available in every British high street chemist while bakeries, cafés, farmers' markets and home delivery veg-box schemes supply ingredients and finished goods to consumers everywhere.

Demand from British consumers has fallen due to the economic crisis but it is still taken for granted that organic choices are readily available. Arriving in Spain to find that this is not the case, and that the price premium for organic goods is even higher than in the UK, can be an unpleasant surprise.

The reasons for the bizarre imbalance between continent-leading production and near-non-existent domestic demand are complex. One



of them is the fact that the very concept of organic food has struggled to enter popular consciousness. Spanish translations of the term are vague: *comida ecológica* and *comida biològica* are used interchangeably but neither is widely understood. The green movement connotations mean that organic food is often still thought of as an alternative lifestyle, hippy idea rather than as a mainstream concept suitable for the high street. Adding to the confusion is the fact that organic certification is granted on a region-by-region basis, resulting in a wide array of flags, stamps and acronyms to denote authenticity.

The organic cookery demonstration at Barcelona's last Film&Cook festival drew an audience which was interested enough to pay

to attend but which seemed baffled by the difference between organic and vegetarian food. The Michelin-starred chef in charge didn't even bother using organic ingredients, shrugging the matter off with the explanation that, organic or not, he knew where they came from. While probably true, it somewhat missed the point while illustrating another – that Spain's consumers don't necessarily see an organic label as a guarantee of quality. Descriptions of regional provenance are often more highly valued than details of production techniques, and animal welfare issues are usually well down the list of concerns when it comes to choosing meat products.

Cost is another major issue. As the prices of even non-organic food commodities rise across the globe, squeezed shoppers are struggling to justify the premium on organic foods, especially if they don't perceive any added value in them. Knowing this, and knowing that buyers of organic ingredients in Spain are prepared to dig deep into their pockets, some retailers make a bad situation worse by hiking up the prices on their organic goods to compensate for narrow margins elsewhere.

This combination of consumer indifference, tighter household budgets and a failure of successive promotional and awareness schemes has led to situations such as that found in Andalucía. The region is the motor of the country's organic production, with some 784,000 hectares (65 per cent of Spain's total) certified as organic. Despite this, the average consumer there spends only €6 per year on organic goods compared with a European average of €50. In Spain as a whole, the average is still only €12 – a tenth of what the average Swiss shopper spends. It has been calculated that over 80 per cent of Spain's organic production is exported. ➤



Pictures: Spanish people are more concerned with regional provenance than with the processes used in production. Organic produce can be found in markets and supermarkets, but there are now several online businesses supplying such products. Box schemes are now available, supplying everything from organic fruit and veg, farmhouse cheeses, almond curls and Galician empanada pasties.



Reasons to be cheerful

The dream of abundant organic goods for sale in Spain may be more of a fantasy but, beyond the gloomy statistics, there are some reasons to be cheerful. Having so much organic production nearby means that if you can find a supplier, Spain's a great place to get fresh, organic food that has very few air-miles.

What Spanish retailers lack in numbers they make up for in enthusiasm and drive, both qualities embodied by the brother and sister team Isabel and Álvaro Ortiz, founders of Mumumio (www.mumumio.com), Spain's pioneering organic food e-commerce site. The Mumumio philosophy is summed up in their list of interests: "The world of food, ecology, sustainability, the development of small and family economies, eating well, eating right, fair and efficient supply chains and efficient technology as a tool for change." All of these are incorporated into their model which aims to directly link producers and consumers of organic goods.

When they began in 2010, their online portal carried products from just three producers. Now the number is up to 130 – and still rising – who between them offer 4,000 organic and ethically-produced goods.

Isabel feels that the Mumumio model of a producer directory with a single user interface has benefits for both shoppers and growers. She explains, "In Mumumio we want to offer people different food experiences so they have an alternative to the supermarkets. On the other hand, we are helping the producers to start selling online as well as getting more fair prices for what they make."

With everything from box schemes for organic fruit and veg and farmhouse Catalan cheeses to Galician empanada pasties, the best of Spain is well represented. For fat-walleted gourmets looking for something different, there's also the chance to buy some imported Kobe beef at €500 per fillet! The Mumumio website isn't yet available in English but there is an online chat function through which Isabel or one of her staff can help you if your Spanish is rusty.

If online shopping isn't your thing, there are alternatives, especially if you live in one of Spain's big cities. Seville-based distributor Eslaveco (www.eslaveco.com) have broadened their regional appeal this year by adding an organic supermarket to their own online portal. In Madrid, the specialist organic supermarket niche is filled by Origen (www.origenbio.es) with one store open and another coming soon, plus NaturaSi (www.naturasi.es), an Italian chain with two locations in the capital. In Catalonia there is an even wider range of choice: Veritas (www.ecoveritas) is the clear market leader with 16 shops in Barcelona alone plus seven more in nearby towns and cities. Trendy, organic, Asian restaurant-cum-supermarket chain Wokimarket (www.wokimarket.com) offers its range of products at four locations in central Barcelona while at the BioSpace supermarket (www.bioespacio.com) you will find the city's widest range of organic products, including an in-store butcher.

There are plenty of small shops that specialise in organic produce, usually known as *ecotiendas*. You may be in luck and find one nearby by searching online or in a local business directory. Equally, some covered markets and farmers' markets in Spain now have stalls selling organic produce.

In Barcelona, one of the city's best ranges of fruit and vegetables *biologics* can be found at BioMercats at the Mercat de l'Abacera in Gracia, while in Seville, an organic farmer's market is held one weekend per month in La Alameda de Hércules.

If you're a dabbler in organic goods rather than an obsessive eco-buyer, you may be interested in picking up just a few items while you do your normal weekly shopping. If that's the case, then big hypermarkets like Carrefour, Auchan (Alcampo) and Hipercor often carry ranges of organic food, sometimes in separate sections and sometimes on the same shelves as everything else so check to see if they have an in-house labelling system that will allow you to pick them out at a glance. There is also a range of organic goods

at most branches of El Corte Ingles, albeit not always at the lowest-possible prices.

The future of organic food in Spain is unclear. With such a strong production base, it seems inevitable that locals – usually keen to buy excellent local produce – will eventually realise that much of the best of what Spain has to offer is going straight overseas. As the national reluctance to embrace online shopping decreases, it is possible that this will become the favoured distribution model. Or perhaps more stalls offering organic goods will appear in the markets so beloved of Spanish shoppers. Whether any real change in buying patterns will occur while the country is still in the grip of an economic crisis is less certain.

It's not always easy to find the best of Spain's organic output but it can be done – and it's certainly worth the effort.

Contacts

Mumumio
Spain's pioneering organic food e-commerce site. (www.mumumio.com)

Eslaveco
Seville-based distributor with a new organic supermarket on their online portal. (www.eslaveco.com)

Origen
Organic shop in Madrid, with an additional shop opening soon. (www.origenbio.es)

NaturaSi
This Italian chain has two locations in the capital. (www.naturasi.es)

Veritas
The market leader in Catalonia, it has 16 shops in Barcelona alone plus seven more in nearby towns and cities. (www.ecoveritas)

Wokimarket
Asian restaurant-cum-supermarket chain sells products at four locations in Barcelona. (www.wokimarket.com)

BioSpace
Barcelona supermarket selling the city's widest range of organic products. (www.bioespacio.com)