



“Gen O” Drives College Menu Changes

You've heard of Gen X and Gen Y? Well, it's time to meet Gen O. They're today's college students and when it comes to food choices, they're demanding more and more of the Big O – organics. Once limited to smaller, progressive schools, organics—along with vegetarian choices and sustainably raised foods—are hitting mainstream college campuses nationwide. Fueled by increasingly food-savvy, environmentally aware students, many of whom were raised on natural and organic foods, it's a trend that promises to spread and to trickle up throughout the industry.

According to the Organic Trade Association, Greenfield, MA, while organic food makes up just 2.5% of current U.S. food sales, it's the fastest growing segment of the market. Sales in 2005 reached nearly \$14 billion, up from \$6 billion five years earlier. The growth on campus, where cash-strapped students and budget-conscious administrators are the norm--has happened despite what remains premium pricing on organics across the board.

San Francisco-based market research firm SPINS estimates that by 2007 manufacturers will ship \$2 billion in natural and organic products to foodservice operations, up from \$330 million in 2002. It's been called the next frontier, and activity at the college level bears that out. According to the OTA, colleges and universities are the principal organic and natural foodservice customers, not only for dorm cafeterias, but also for on-campus restaurants and c-stores.

Here are some examples of the “Big O” on campus:

- Colorado College in Colorado Springs touts the “clean cuisine” of its on-campus restaurant, Wild Sage. With healthy versions of casual comfort food—wraps, sandwiches, burgers, desserts—and a coffee and juice bar, Wild Sage's ingredients are about 80% organic. "It's great to start in the college atmosphere," says Lauren Bell, a California chef who created the concept and has licensed it through contract foodservice leader Sodexo. "They appreciate the socially responsible company, green design, and many of the elements of Wild Sage in addition to organic foods."
- The Berkeley College dining hall at Yale University in New Haven, CT, kicked off that school's quest to add more organics to the menu in 2003 as part of the Yale Sustainable Foods Project (YSFP). Students have enjoyed a wide range of organic menu items, from pizzas and salads to grass-fed burgers with organic cheese, to salsa made from the school farm's organic tomato crop. All dairy products served by the school are now organic. Funding for the project has increased, and organic choices are now in abundance on the menus of all the school's 12 dining halls. Dining officials said the project's expansion is due to

overwhelming student desire for the kind of food regularly produced in Berkeley's kitchen.

- A student group at the University of California is campaigning to have organic foods available on the UCLA campus and on its dining hall menus. The Food Systems Working Group there looks to sister campuses, like UC Santa Cruz, where it says 10% of the produce is organic, and to UC Berkeley, which recently introduced a certified-organic salad bar, for inspiration and precedent.
- At Phillips Exeter Academy, a grades 9-12 boarding school in New Hampshire, sustainable foods and organics get top billing. Dining services director David Davidson admits that serving organics takes more purchasing legwork and management, and that it's also more expensive. But with additional funding secured, he's been able to cover the added expense and now purchases locally grown and/or organic produce, flour, milk, yogurt, granola, whole eggs, honey and herbs. He's investigating the availability of organic meats and is experimenting with more organic dairy products. Two of the hottest organic food items on the menu are organic baby spinach and baby carrots, both of which are now comparable in cost to regular spinach and baby carrots.