



# WHAT MAKES ORGANIC DIFFERENT?

In the U.S., all products labeled as “organic” must be certified to the USDA National Organic Program (NOP) or equivalent international standard. At QAI, we inspect and review records to provide organic certification at every stage of the supply chain. Here’s how the process works.



## FARMING AND HARVESTING

Improving soil quality is a core tenet of organic certification. Farms must stop applying prohibited substances for at least three years before their crops can be labeled as organic. They are also encouraged to rotate crops to improve soil fertility, increase yield and resist disease. Harvesting and processing equipment must be cleaned and sanitized in accordance with NOP requirements.



## PROCESSING

In this stage, organic crops can be processed with other organic products, such as mixing wheat with seeds and spices to make bread. Organic ingredients in multi-ingredient products must be labeled. Processors must keep records proving organic ingredients they source are indeed organic.



## PACKAGING AND LABELING

Packaging may occur in the field or at a facility. The product is cleaned, canned, bagged or otherwise packaged. It is also given a product label, name or identification number such as a UPC code. Correct labeling helps consumers know what they’re buying. Three organic labels are allowed:

- > **100 percent organic:** product contains 100 percent organic ingredients and processing aids.
- > **Organic:** product contains at least 95 percent organically produced ingredients, with the remaining percentage from the National List of allowed ingredients.
- > **Made with Organic ingredients:** product contains a minimum of 70 percent organic content with the remaining percentage of allowed ingredients.

Through inspection and records evaluation, organic products are verified to make sure organic integrity is maintained from harvest through packaging and that products are labeled correctly.



## SHIPPING AND DISTRIBUTION

Products may be shipped to distributors, retail stores and restaurants. QAI conducts inspections to confirm that organic products and ingredients have been protected from comingling with nonorganic products or contaminated by prohibited materials. This comingling or contamination can occur if the product is repackaged or during the loading and unloading of trucks.



## RETAIL AND RESTAURANTS

When consumers choose products with the USDA organic seal and the QAI Certified Organic mark, they can rest assured that each step in that product’s organic supply chain meets the NOP guidelines.



# ORGANIC 101

## 1. What is organic?

Organic refers to products that are produced without using conventional pesticides, irradiation, most synthetic fertilizers or bioengineering. For example, organic meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products come from animals that are not given antibiotics or growth hormones and are fed organic feed.

## 2. Is organic food grown in another country required to meet U.S. organic regulations?

Yes, all organic food that is going to be sold as organic in the U.S. is required to follow the U.S. standards and be certified by a USDA-accredited certifier or be certified to an equivalent international standard.

## 3. Why should I buy organic? Is organic food healthier?

Increasing evidence suggests that organically produced foods may be more nutritious. Organic foods and fiber are spared the application of toxic and persistent insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and fertilizers. Many EPA-approved pesticides were registered long before extensive research linked these chemicals to cancer and other diseases. In the long run, organic farming techniques provide a safer, more sustainable environment for everyone.

## 4. Why is organic food more expensive?

Organic foods have stricter regulations on growing, harvesting, transportation and storage so the process is often more labor- and management-intensive, and farming tends to be on a smaller scale. However when you look at the big picture, if all the indirect costs of conventional food production—cleanup of polluted water, replacement of eroded soils, costs of health care for farmers and their workers—were factored into the price of food, organic foods would cost the same or, more likely, be cheaper.

## 5. What types of products can become certified organic?

Any agricultural product that meets certification requirements may be considered organic. Organic products can include foods ranging from canned products to fresh produce, meats, poultry and bakery products to beverages (including juices and milk) and even personal care products and clothes.

## 6. Are products labeled as “natural” the same as “organic?”

No. Natural and organic are not interchangeable. The term “natural” suggests that products have been minimally processed or are free from synthetic ingredients, but only products labeled “organic” have been certified as meeting USDA organic standards. Other claims, such as free-range, hormone-free and natural can still appear on product labels. However, such claims should not be confused with the term “organic.”

## 7. Why is certification important?

Certification assures organic integrity from seed to shelf, boosts consumer confidence, protects consumers from fraud and provides product differentiation.

This fact sheet is based on information from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) and the Organic Trade Association (OTA) websites. For more, visit [www.ams.usda.gov](http://www.ams.usda.gov).

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