



Debate on whether the organic food movement is a scam

Losing the organic debate

By Dennis Avery Tuesday, April 20, 2010

Churchville, VA—I lost a debate on organic food last week—to the city of New York

Intelligence Squared, a philanthropic foundation, which brings Oxford-style debating to American issues, invited me to be part of a debate on whether the organic food movement is a scam. The invitation was a big deal, with the audio carried nationwide by National Public Radio and the TV shown repeatedly on Bloomberg TV.

Each of us six debaters got seven minutes to present our best arguments.

Lord Krebs was formerly head of Britain's Food Standards Authority.. He quietly pointed out that the UK bars its organic farmers from making any claims of greater food safety or better nutrition—because in 80 years they've never documented any such benefits.

The elite New York audience yawned.

Blake Hurst, a farmer from Missouri, noted that most of America's organic food is produced on giant farms in California, where they avoid using pesticides by having Mexican immigrants pull the weeds by hand. With the subtraction from organic of every "unnatural" additive, the fungi, molds and bugs increase, Hurst said. His biggest environmental sin had been letting too much nitrogen run off his fields and down the Mississippi River—until he adopted no-till, the soil-safest farming system ever. With no-till, there is virtually no runoff from the fields. Organic farmers still commit "bare earth farming," he warned, because they refuse to use herbicides. Their plowing and mechanical cultivation encourage erosion.

The New Yorkers didn't care.

I pointed out that high-yield farming has saved millions of acres of wildlands from being plowed for low-yield organic crops. We're farming 37 percent of the land area now, and we'll need twice as much food when human populations peak about 2050. To prevent mass starvation and wildlands destruction we'll need to double yields again—with nitrogen fertilizer, pesticides and biotechnology.

The New Yorkers barely restrained themselves from booing.

On the other side were Jeff Steingarten, the Vogue food critic; a cheerful frequent traveler on the organic talk circuit named Chuck Benbrook; and Urvashi Rangan of Consumer Reports.

Benbrook professed to be puzzled why nobody cares about the tiny and intermittent differences in nutrient levels between organic and conventional foods.

Ms. Rangan starred, drawing cheers and applause as she complained about “pools of pig poo the size of the Great Lakes” and “chickens that didn’t have room to turn around in their cages.” Apparently animal welfare arguments are resonating louder than pesticide scares in New York this season.

On our side, Hust remembered when the mother pig rolled over and crushed his 4-H piglets; gestation crates prevent that. His neighbor’s free-range turkeys often got their throats slit by weasels.

I said the best argument for confinement livestock was human disease risks. I quoted physiologist Jared Diamond, best-selling author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*, that most of humanity’s epidemic diseases came from microbes shuttling between humans and their domestic critters. They mutated into cholera, yellow fever, and smallpox, among other deadly risks. Today, Asian flu mutates every year in Asia’s outdoor village poultry flocks, and wild birds spread it worldwide.

Urvashi said she’d never heard of such a thing. But then, she didn’t really want to concede another valid, scientifically documented reality.

When the debate opened, 21 percent of the audience had agreed organic was “marketing hype,” 45 percent said no, with 34 percent undecided. At the end, our side still had 21 percent for “marketing hype”—but all the “un-decideds” had swung against us.

New York may be hopeless. Will the rest of the country continue to back organic food if it takes 80 percent of the earth’s land area to produce our basic food supplies organically?