

## **06-03-05 Exerpts from: "What Is Organic? Powerful Players Want a Say"**

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Customers at [McDonald's](#) restaurants in New England are about to get something a little different when they order coffee. Through a deal with [Green Mountain Coffee](#) Roasters and Newman's Own, McDonald's will soon be serving a coffee that comes from organic beans and is certified Fair Trade because it meets higher standards in the treatment of coffee workers.

The move, while still a test in a limited region, reflects a much broader trend: The growing interest among large food companies in offering organic foods along with their standard products.

With sales of roughly \$12 billion, organic food remains a niche market within the \$500 billion food industry. But the sector's growing appeal to consumers has fueled a 20 percent annual growth rate in recent years, making it highly attractive to food giants looking for gains in a slow-moving business.

Consumer groups and some organic pioneers say they are concerned that the movement - a response to the practices of corporate food production that promotes a natural chemical-free approach to farming - will become watered down unless firm standards are maintained. The debate has been under way for several years. But last week, Senate and House Republicans on the Agriculture appropriations subcommittee inserted a last-minute provision into the department's fiscal 2006 budget specifying that certain artificial ingredients could be used in organic food.

Many in the organic industry say they are willing to allow some use of synthetics in organic food. Since 2002, the National Organic Standards Board, a 15-member panel of advisers appointed by the Agriculture Department, has served as the gatekeeper for such substances. In that time, 38 have been approved, many of them relatively harmless ingredients like baking powder, pectin, ascorbic acid and carbon dioxide.

But Joseph Mendelson, legal director at the Center for Food Safety, a liberal advocacy group, says that the proposed legislation will open the door to a range of other chemicals and artificial materials, including a large category of so-called food contact substances - things like boiler additives, disinfectants and lubricants with unpronounceable names. Most of these substances would not end up in finished products in detectable amounts. But many in the organic community say that these tools of mainstream food processing do not belong in organic production.

Such tensions are likely to remain whatever the new legislation allows. Sheryl O'Laughlin, chief executive of Clif Bar, which makes organic energy bars, says that while the difficulty of operating organically and finding natural ingredients often ends up raising production costs, it is also what gives the category its purity and its appeal.

"The organic industry," Ms. O'Laughlin said, "has got to put pressure on itself to find alternative solutions."



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