

Cooking 2011

SPECIAL SECTION 2011

ORGANIC AND NATURAL FOOD

Organically grown, naturally good for you

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Childhood obesity is a hot topic regarding the health of our society's future. Obesity, stress, vitamin deficiency and weight-related diseases are all over the news. Your grocery may hold the answers to many of your family's health concerns. Consumers need to look at more than just what part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "My Plate" they are eating from. The terms "organic" and "natural" taunt us with promises of healthy eating, but what does that really mean?

"Certified organic producers and processors must adhere to rigorous growing and processing standards verified by a third party, either an independent or a state certification organization," explains Barbara Haumann, senior writer and editor with the Organic Trade Association. "'Organic' refers to how products are grown and processed, and the use of 'organic' on the label of a food or beverage product will denote that it meets or exceeds U.S. national organic standards, which begin with how the ingredients are grown and, later, how they are processed and handled."

Organic farms are certified annually by an independent certification agency that has been approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Haumann points out. Soo Kim of the USDA says: "For crop production, standards require that organic crops grow on land without any prohibited substances applied to it for at least three years before harvest and without use of genetically modified organisms, ionizing radiation or sewage sludge and that soil and crop are managed without the use of toxic commercial pesticides. Instead, producers rely on tilling, rotating crops and other approved means."

"Processed food products that carry the organic label must maintain the organic integrity that began on the farm," Haumann says. Kim adds, "In the case of organic livestock, this means no hormones to promote growth, no antibiotics, 100 percent organic feed, no mammalian or poultry

byproducts in feed, and year-round access to pasture."

Organically grown and processed foods protect the safety and integrity of the food products we serve our families. They also help protect the environment, because pesticides and other harmful chemicals are not used in the organic science and there is no harmful water runoff carrying toxins into the soil.

There are some who use the terms "natural" and "organic" interchangeably, but experts say they are nothing alike.

"Natural" refers to what is added -- or not added, as it were -- to food. The Food Safety and Inspection Service defines "natural" in the following way: "A product containing no artificial ingredient or added color and (that) is only minimally processed" (meaning it hasn't been "fundamentally altered") may be labeled natural.

"The Natural Product Association's Natural Seal is the first and only natural certification in the U.S. NPA has certified nearly 700 products and ingredients since 2008," says Mike Keaton, communications manager for the NPA. "Products certified by NPA must be at least 95 percent natural ingredients or ingredients from natural sources, excluding water. The Natural Seal is awarded to products that achieve the 95 percent science-based standard as certified by independent third-party auditors. NPA-certified products use natural ingredients, avoid ingredients with health risks, don't use ani-

mal testing and include a majority of biodegradable or recycled material in the packaging. Products with the Natural Seal list all ingredients on the package label so consumers can quickly and easily make informed decisions."

"Thanks to the growth of private label products, farmers markets, manufacturer coupons and customer loyalty programs, buying organic is easier and more affordable than ever," says Jennifer Rose, manager of the Organic Trade Association's consumer website, <http://www.OrganicIsWorthIt.org>. To get the best value and highest quality from the foods you



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SLOW COOKER DO'S & DON'TS

Make your home cooking the best it can be

Sharon Naylor
Creators.com

Slow cookers help you create fabulous dishes with minimal amounts of time and effort. Just add in your ingredients and turn on the machine. While you go about your day, it does all the work, producing a delicious meal, stew, soup, snack or even dessert, without your having to slave over a hot stove. "Slow cooking gives a wonderful velvety texture to meatloaf, an incredible richness to osso buco Milanese, and bold and complex flavors to curried vegetables and dal simmered in Indian spices," says Andrew Schloss, author of "Art of the Slow Cooker." According to Beth Hensperger and Julie Kaufmann, authors of "Not Your Mother's Slow Cooker Cookbook," 80 percent of American households own a slow cooker.

Don't worry that a kitchen appliance running for eight or more hours wastes energy and raises electric bills; slow cookers are extremely energy-efficient, especially those marked with the Energy Star label. They also retain most of their heat, so they don't steam up your kitchen.

Slow cookers also maximize your food budget, because they tenderize cheaper cuts of meat and allow you to extract flavor from bones and vegetable stalks and leaves. And

they're easy to clean because temperatures do not get very high, which would cause burning in the pot.

Here are the top do's and don'ts for creating tasty dishes using your slow cooker:

*Do's

--Do experiment with your slow cooker. The experts at Hamilton Beach encourage you to try various settings and timings on a variety of recipes to familiarize yourself with your model's strength and performance.

--Do spray the inside of the slow cooker with a non-stick cooking spray before every recipe to prevent food from sticking and to make cleanup easier.

--Do fill the cooker at least halfway, but no more than three-quarters of the way to the top, so that your dish cooks well in the required amount of time and does not overcook and become dry. Most recipes, according to Hamilton Beach's experts, call for cooking on low for eight hours or on high for four hours. A well-filled slow cooker will heat ideally with those parameters.

--Do add completely thawed meat to the slow cooker for proper cooking.

--Do brown meat on the stove before adding it to the slow cooker. That will make for richer flavor and texture.

--Do precook ground meat and sausage to render out the fat before you add the meat to the slow cooker.

--Do cut root vegetables into 1-inch cubes so that

