

The Mechanics of new media (science) writing Articulation, Design, Hospitality, and Electracy

Student Podcast Transcript: Organic & Sustainable (Chris, Emily, and Katie)

Katie: [0:00] In the world of food, fancy terms and normative standards can be quite daunting. Organic foods are all the rage, and yet a clear understanding of their benefits remains elusive. Today, we'd like to get to the root of the matter. It seems time to peel away the layers of buzzwords and find out what they mean for us: for the ways we live, the ways we produce and consume, and for all the ways our doing those things affects our world and the people with whom we share it.

[music intro]

It's lucky for us, being three students at Saint Louis University, that our campus is home to some cutting-edge interest and research in organic and sustainable food systems.

Chris: [0:45] This meant that the start of a journey was a short shuttle ride to our school's medical campus. Visiting the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, we found a vibrant community of students and scholars not only immersed in theoretical investigations, but elbow deep in the practice of organic and sustainable methods in their very own garden.

Katie: [1:08] All of these elements proved to be fertile resources as we searched for a better understanding of the complex vocabulary and scientific underpinnings of all the organic signage we see in grocery stores. So we started by taking stock of what we thought we already knew.

Emily: [1:25] Do you guys know what organic means? I really don't, I don't think.

Katie: It seems like a word that people throw around a lot.

Chris: Organic?

Katie: Sometimes it seems like *organic* means *expensive*.

Emily: That's how I feel.

Katie: But is it something else? I don't know.

Chris: I think you maybe have to have, like, dreadlocks or something.

Emily: And you have to drive Priuses, too.

Chris: Ok, yea, Priuses. You have to drive a Prius.

Emily: And is it even that different? Is it better? I mean, I know it makes people feel better, but is the stuff you're getting out of the food better necessarily?

Katie: Right, is it actually better for you?

Emily: Right.

Katie: Is it doing something positive for your body?

Emily: Yeah. I don’t know.

Katie: [2:00] Because we didn’t know the answers to any of these questions, we decided to head over to our university’s Department of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Lauren: [2:09] Basically, what we do here at SLU is we...[indiscernible speech]

Katie [Narration]: [2:14] That’s Lauren. She knows all about food and sustainable food systems, and the sorts of effects that those things have for the health of consumers.

Lauren: [2:22] I’m Lauren Landfriend. I’m a registered dietician, and I’m an instructor, a faculty member, at Saint Louis University’s Department of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Katie: [2:32] To be sure we were all on the same page, we first asked Lauren to help us understand what *organic* really means.

Lauren: [2:39] *Organic* means using 95 percent organic methods. If a product is labeled organic, then they do check that there aren’t chemicals or synthetic fertilizers in the ground. They check the produce to make sure it’s grown organically, and so it is regulated.

Katie [Narration]: [3:12] So, all these regulations make it seem like the difference between organic foods and conventional foods is a pretty big deal. Will I be a healthier person if I choose organic foods? We posed this question to Lauren.

Lauren: [3:26] There’s been a lot of research on looking at comparing organic to conventionally farmed foods, and there hasn’t been a difference shown that one is better than the other. You would think that maybe organic would be better. However, you do have the social impact of not using the synthetic fertilizers, and by social I mean purchasing it and feeding it to people and them consuming something with the synthetic fertilizers and pesticides and different things like that.

Katie [Narration]: [4:02] So, those all seem like noble reasons to choose organic, but what’s with the cost difference? Why is there such a price discrepancy between organic foods and those foods grown using more conventional methods? Are we just imagining that?

Lauren: [4:16] Organic is quite a bit more expensive. It costs the farmer quite a bit of money to be able to certify that their product is organic, and so you will notice, especially in a local type of a food system, that not a lot of the farmers will be able to afford to pay for the organic labeling. However, they may use organic methods for their produce but they just can’t afford it. It’s pretty expensive too, which you see at the grocery store—the difference between the conventional and the organic—there’s a huge price discrepancy.

Katie [Narration]: [4:52] Our conversation with Lauren reveals the term *organic* as much more than a mere buzzword. Wrapped up in that elusive term that we see scattered all across grocery aisles and menus and food publications are hearty social and economic implications. Even beyond those considerations, we’re likely to hear about food sustainability in the same breath. This usually refers to those sustainable methods by which those foods are produced. But what does it mean?

What is *sustainable*? We tried to think about the many ways in which we might already be living sustainably, or in the ways that maybe we should be doing so. And we discovered that, much like with the term *organic*, we didn't have all the answers to our questions. To forge our own Sustainable 101 educational model, we looked to another expert here at SLU.

Emily: [5:45] Coincidentally, this semester I enrolled in a philosophy course here at SLU entitled Ethical Considerations on Climate Change. And, I'll admit that sustainability was not at the front of my mind when I registered. After being totally *Plato-ed* out from my last philosophy class, I thought that a class dealing with current issues might be a little easier to understand. So, while I might have missed the intro class into *Green*, I skipped a few steps and landed in a sea of terms and ideas related to climate change.

David: An endless source of material for comics...

Emily [Narration]: [6:21] That's my professor, David Pollack, who I decided to ask about this mysterious buzzword, *sustainability*.

[To David] Sustainability: what does this actually mean?

David: Right...

Emily: Because it gets thrown around a lot.

David: [6:33] So, it means several things: living in a way that's harmonious with nature, that doesn't upset nature's balance, and also doesn't compromise the ability of future generations to [have] the same resources, lifestyle, living standards that one has. So sustainability is a big issue these days because we're living in a way that's using up the earth's natural resources in ways that are very destructive. We're over-fishing the oceans, for example, but we're also—because of greenhouse gases—messing with the climate systems which have been stable for thousands of years and interfering with them in ways that would be destructive and may cause things like we're already experiencing, like droughts. In some cases too much rain, too little rain, changes in ecosystems, changes in climate patterns that have been stable. So, once you don't get the water supply that you're accustomed to and once you don't get the food supply that you're accustomed to, you generate severe stresses in human populations, especially with 7 billion people on the earth. And, this could lead to things as extreme as wars over food and water. Wars have been fought over a lot less.

Emily: [7:48] Whoa. There's a lot more to sustainability than I ever thought. Talking to David really made me think. He said that we need to try to live so as not to compromise the lives of future generations. Future generations? I can barely think about where I'm going to be in five years, let alone what the lives of my future children will be like. After thinking about the way I live *my* life, I really wanted to make a change. But where to start?

As per usual, my mind went back to the idea of food. I mean, eating is something I do every single day, so if I made a change there, it might really count for something, right?

Katie: [8:29] Once we had gained a better understanding of what these terms might mean, we had the opportunity to see them in action.

And it is this divide—this difference in theory and practice—that we began to see as the source of our confusion about what these terms meant for us and how we live our lives.

Do organic and sustainable always mean the same things for everyone? Maybe not. But we found that—with a strong theoretical foundation—students and scholars alike are engaged in work that bridges the gap.

Chris: [8:58] Organically grown and sustainable food practices are big concepts to grasp. Each contains a lot of issues, definitions, and opinions. But those things aside: what do those concepts look like on the ground, literally? Vendors from local food producers came to campus for Saint Louis University's Food Day. The event took place in the center of an urban garden in Midtown St. Louis. The garden produces everything from kale, to freshly-laid eggs from the resident chickens. This seemed like a good place to dig deeper into these issues.

Food Day Volunteer #1: Today we have the acorn squash and the pork, and they're both stuffed with a mushroom stuffing. The mushrooms are the Ozark Forest mushrooms.

Food Day Volunteer #2: There's smoked beets, apples, onions, green peppers, squash, cucumbers.

Chris: And this is all locally grown?

Food Day Volunteer #2: All locally grown. Some of it's from here, like the herbs down there, and some of it is from farms.

Chris [Narration]: [10:07] Sounds tasty, right? And, it's all local. By the time I made it to the dessert tent, they had run out.

Food Day Volunteer #3: [10:13] We had a really yummy, chocolate peanut butter tart, to an extent. It had a jelly in it made with Raspberry Hefeweizen from Schlafly. And then we had a really good almond, kind of granola bar crunch, and it had caramel on it, mixed in with a stout from Schlafly as well. And then we're also sampling the Winged Nut from Urban Chestnut.

Chris [Narration]: [10:36] What she's talking about is locally brewed beer—not something I would have associated with environmental matters. But it makes sense when thinking about reducing transportation. It was too early in the day for alcohol for me anyways, so I fought off post-lunch lethargy and sought out others at Food Day to engage with until I noticed students under a large, white tent vigorously pedaling stationary bikes.

[11:03 bicycle whirring]

Food Day Biker: [11:30] Oh, it's a bike blender.

Chris: And why are you guys doing that?

Food Day Biker: Promoting physical activity and healthy eating.

Chris: So, you're pedaling the bike and that's blending up—what is that?

Food Day Biker: It's an apple pie smoothie. So it was made from local milk, the yogurt, and homemade apple butter, almonds, and that's it.

Chris: How long do you have to do that until it's blended up?

Food Day Blender: Oh, about 30 seconds.

Food Day Biker: Yeah.

Chris: Are you doing it more? If you want to continue, go ahead.

Food Day Blender: Actually, it's probably done, it takes about 30 seconds.

Chris [Narration]: [12:00] I had only been at food day for 20 minutes and was realizing that it was about more than food. It kind of seemed to me that sustainability was sort of a blanket statement. Or, maybe an attitude. Food Day attendees seemed to agree.

Food Day Attendee #1: [12:15] It is a catch-all. Basically, what it is is producing food in an environmentally-friendly way. So it ties into the whole idea that you put as little in the ground that's going to be harmful over the long run, you support local farmers so that there is not the long transportation charge that, you know—transportation time therefore subsequent charge that you would have to spend. The benefit to the consumer is that your food is fresher and it's grown closer to home. You typically know what's in it.

Chris [Narration]: [12:50] Since we were talking practical matters about food, I inquired about price.

Food Day Attendee #1: Organic tends to be more expensive, but the locally-produced, locally-grown stuff typically isn't more expensive.

Food Day Attendee #2: Oh, I go to the farmers' market almost every second Saturday.

Chris: In Soulard [a neighborhood in Saint Louis]?

Food Day Attendee #2: Yeah, and it's really cheap. Like, if you compare to a grocery store—Schnuck's, or whatever—it's so cheap. It's unimaginably cheap. You might get, if you go a little bit toward the end, a whole carton of eggplant for just three bucks.

Chris: [13:20] Will you guys pay more for something if it says organic? You will?

Food Day Attendee #3: Yes, because there's less of a chance of pesticides and chemicals that, even if we don't know for sure yet how bad they are, there's a chance and so, I prefer organic.

Chris: Do you pay more?

Food Day Attendee #4: Yes. It's grown and produced in a more environmentally friendly way, typically. And, as she [Attendee #3] said, it's freer of pesticides.

Chris: Does it taste different? Can you tell if something is organic?

Food Day Attendee #3: I can't tell.

Chris [Narration]: [13:54] But, getting back to my original question: how does food being organic and sustainable come into play, here on the ground?

Millie: Well, for us here we talk about sustainable food systems.

Chris [Narration]: [14:12] This is Millie Mattfeldt-Beman, PhD, Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at SLU. She’s referred to by her colleagues as “the grandmother of sustainability.”

Millie: [14:25] So, you’re looking at issues of social justice for the people who grow your food. You shouldn’t expect to get your food for nothing, you shouldn’t expect those people who have to work to grow your food to get less than minimum wage—there has to be justice in that. People should have access to food that’s compatible with their culture. It shouldn’t be a forced issue. And you should be growing food in a way that not only sustains the earth, but builds it, so that the next group that comes to grow on it has good earth. And we’re building it for the future, not stripping it of everything it has.

Chris [Narration]: [15:07] I felt like I had learned a lot at Food Day. But, I also felt that the event had generated a lot of questions.

The idea of this report was to find out what the terms *organic* and *sustainable* really mean. What I think I found is that they’re hard to define in a Webster’s dictionary sort of way. Thanks to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the term *organic* cannot be used unless the seller is USDA-accredited organic. This does provide a definition of sorts, however, whether or not organic food is any better or worse for you is still up for debate.

On the other hand, *sustainability* is a little bit more ambiguous. According to the EPA, sustainability is based on a simple principle: everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. This EPA principle is not a scientific one, which I think lends itself well to how one should think about sustainability. It’s like a golden rule of sorts for how to interact with nature.

Katie: [16:16] As time goes on, it’s likely that science and perhaps plain old common sense will drive the adoption or desertion of sustainable and organic food practices. For instance, pesticides may always be used to get rid of pests, but maybe technology will make pesticides and other chemicals so safe that organic growing methods become irrelevant.

[16:36 music intro]

Chris: [16:38] The same could be said about sustainability; maybe one day humans will not be dependent on the natural environment as we are now. Bob Dylan once said, “The times they are a-changin’,” and I have little doubt that what the words *sustainable* and *organic* mean to us now will morph through time, perhaps reflecting different ideals, goals, and actions for future generations.

[music outro]