
THE FACES OF ORGANIC

KNOLL FARMS: Movement's critics go beyond the 'O' word in Brentwood

- [Janet Fletcher, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Rick and Kristie Knoll's figs draw long lines of suitors at San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in summer. Heavy with sugar, with honey often dripping from their blossom ends, the Brown Turkey and Kadota figs go home with seduced shoppers who don't flinch at paying \$5 a pound.

What the fruit's fans may not have noticed is that their supplier has changed names: the former Knoll Organic Farms is now simply Knoll Farms, a small alteration with big implications.

Leaving organic

In a protest move that the couple feared might cost them more than half their business, the Knolls banished what they now call "the 'O' word" from the name of their Brentwood farm in 2002 and dropped organic certification.

"We didn't want to be associated with it," says Rick Knoll, 56, a lanky man with a farmer's ruddy, weathered face, snow-white eyebrows and a long braid of platinum-blond hair. Knoll was so convinced that abandoning organics would undermine his sales that he bought a surfboard to take advantage of what he expected would be slow times.

In fact, the farm's business has continued to grow and the surfboard lies unused. Only one customer -- Berkeley Natural Grocery -- dropped the Knolls as vendors. The farms' prominent restaurant customers -- Chez Panisse and Oliveto among them -- have continued to purchase the Knolls' figs, green garlic, fava beans, cardoons, artichokes, Blenheim apricots and other specialties, despite the couple's full-throttled critique of the organic movement.

What caused the Knolls' change of heart, after almost two decades of certified organic production, was the U.S. Department of Agriculture's effort to codify national organic standards.

Fundamentalist view

The heated debates that preceded the adoption of the standards in 2002 -- whether genetically modified crops could be certified organic, whether sewage sludge was an organic soil amendment, whether chlorine rinses should be allowed on organic salad greens -- split the organic community, with, typically, large-scale growers favoring liberal interpretations and small growers like the Knolls taking a more fundamentalist view.

"I felt like the feds were going to be lowering the bar," says Kristie Knoll, 57, a petite, voluble woman with close-cropped hair. "That blew me away. You don't ever lower the bar. That's not how you achieve greatness."

Although, in the end, the USDA organic standards prohibited genetically modified crops and the use of sewage sludge, the Knolls felt that the government was nibbling away at the integrity of the regulations that had defined organic farming in the past. In their view, the new standards may have codified the rudiments of organic practice, but they ignored the environmentalist spirit that drove so many young idealistic people into organic farming in the 1970s and 1980s.

Bagged organic salad greens are exhibit A in the Knolls' case against the federal standards. Processors are allowed to rinse the greens in chlorinated water as long as the water leaving the facility and the water remaining on the product are diluted to four parts chlorine per million, comparable to municipal water. But Rick Knoll argues that oversight is lax and that the chlorine creates a potential wastewater problem.

"So certified organic farmers are creating toxic water," says the farmer, who has a doctorate in organic chemistry. "And now chlorinated greens are sent across the country. Does that sound like organics? What happened to fresh, seasonal and local?"

Although the Knolls no longer complete the burdensome paperwork, pay the fees and submit to the inspections required for organic certification, they claim that their organic growing practices haven't changed.

'Ecological' farmers

If anything, says Rick Knoll, he and Kristie have become more rigorous in what they now refer to as ecological farming. They have implemented biodynamic methods and talk about "evolving beyond" organic, a word they believe has been irreparably diluted by large

organic farms with a bottom-line mentality.

The Knolls backed into farming in 1979 after purchasing 10 acres in Brentwood. Refugees from Orange County, where Rick Knoll had worked as an aerospace-industry chemist and Kristie Knoll as a legal secretary, the couple were looking for more room to garden and a more rural life. With their new property, they quickly found that they could produce more than they could possibly eat and began taking their extra harvest to farmers' markets. Today they grow a variety of stone fruits, herbs, flowers and specialty vegetables, such as cardoon, green garlic and chicories.

No objections

Their farmers' market customers haven't objected to the Knolls' lack of organic certification. San Francisco's Rainbow Grocery complained at first because the produce no longer fit into one of the market's three categories: certified organic, in transition or conventional. The store carries it anyway.

Whole Foods, which had dropped Knoll Farms because its prices were higher than the large organic vendors, now buys the produce again. The Knolls haven't dropped their prices, but their product is no longer competing with the low-cost organics. Now, it's "specialty produce."

"My only regret in not being part of the organic thing is in terms of trying to change it from the inside," says Kristie Knoll. "When your church goes bad, do you bail or try to change it? We bailed. It seemed like the movement was really going corporate, and this was one of the reasons I was happy to bail."

Knoll Farms is at 12510 Byron Hwy., Brentwood; (925) 634-5959, and sells on Saturdays at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market, on Embarcadero (at Market), San Francisco.

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