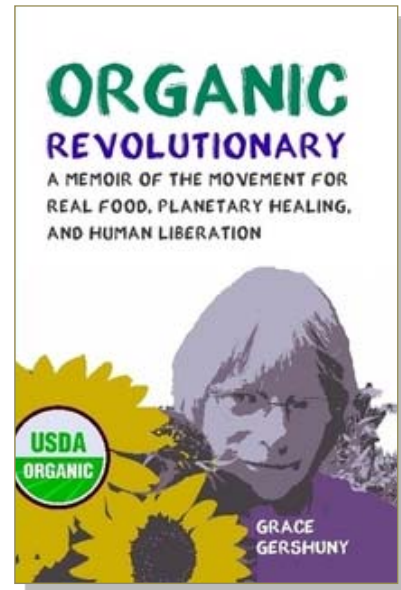


Traveling the path of an organic revolutionary

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Review of *Organic Revolutionary: A Memoir of the Movement for Real Food, Planetary Healing, and Human Liberation*, by Grace Gershuny. (2016). Published by Joes Book Press. Available as paperback (and ebook, forthcoming); 240 pages. Publisher's website: <http://www.organic-revolutionary.com>



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In *Organic Revolutionary*, Grace Gershuny (former staff member of the National Organic Program [NOP] of the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA]) recalls her journey helping blaze a trail for organic certification in the 1990s. Her memoir makes for a powerful recounting of the trials and tribulations of being tasked with the David and Goliath-sized job of leading a team to draft the

rules for what would eventually become the first process-based set of regulations governing an entire set of food production practices. Creating definitions for those practices, crafting the rules governing those practices, and calculating how to pass such legislation amid political (and at times consumer-driven) opposition are the steps along Gershuny's journey.

For younger readers, who consider eating a political act and who care deeply about the impact their food dollars have on the health of their families, the environment, and the animals upon whom they rely for sustenance, it can be difficult to imagine a time before the existence of the USDA Organic label. Gershuny's book provides a first-hand account of how the label came into existence in 2002. Readers will walk in Gershuny's shoes, navigating a precarious political scene replete with

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landmines, including key issues such as whether the organic label should appear on foods produced through genetic engineering.

Throughout her book, Gershuny returns to the related themes of the value of organic production and the challenges inherent in convincing the USDA to accept the value of this alternative food production method as part of its agricultural policy. She dedicated a decade of government service to developing a clear, consistent, and reliable means of denoting a product of organic quality—a critical prerequisite if organic production were “to become a major force in US agriculture” (p. 60). Once these laws were on the books, she knew that “every federal agricultural agency would have to offer assistance, be it technical, marketing or financial, to producers interested in using organic methods” (p. xiii).

Gershuny and her team further recognized that it would take only a few bad actors—producers trying to relabel and pass off conventional product as organic, thereby reaping a premium profit—to create a pervasive distrust that could eventually undermine the entire system for which they were advocating. Without the creation of the NOP, there would be no legal recourse for consumers or authentic organic producers against those producers who were less than scrupulous about adhering to the principles of organic production. For those consumers who choose organic, Gershuny’s expedition into the legislative belly of rulemaking has ensured that those choices are legitimate ones.

Gershuny describes the challenges of “working within the system that you hope to replace” (p. 53). Internal opposition to an organic system of food production partly explains why the first rule was not published until almost eight years after the law was passed and why the NOP was not officially implemented for four more years. Delay was also due to the ever-present “tension between purist and pragmatist perspectives” (p. 64). This tension played out in many arenas, including determining the list of acceptable inputs, prohibited practices, and standards for certification.

A key strength of the book is its readability; Gershuny explains in her prologue that her work is “not intended to be an academic treatise” (p. xvii), and she remains true to her pledge. The book is

full of details and explanations of the legislative process, but not overwhelmingly so. Gershuny’s endnotes and annotated bibliography allow interested readers to take a deeper dive into the issues she presents. Her use of graphics and sidebars breaks legal and policy details down into digestible bits of information.

Every book has its shortcomings, however, and Gershuny’s is no exception. While the graphics are helpful, a visual timeline of significant events would have been a welcome addition. She admits that she intended to organize her account in a “roughly chronological” fashion, but that the chapters “somewhat zigzag” through time (p. xvii). These temporal relocations and adjustments complicate the reader’s path, and the narrative use of foreshadowing is sometimes overdone. Parts of her book seem to be attempts at self-exoneration, and she may be too passionate in trying to “set the record straight” as to what she was advocating and what supporters and naysayers believed she was advocating. Nevertheless, the reader can appreciate Gershuny’s outrage at being accused of watering down organic standards when she was working so diligently for so long to create them and enshrine them in the regulations.

The balance between providing a factual recounting of events and personal details is a hard one to strike in memoir, and Gershuny is more successful at it in some places than others. Some long sections describing the legal and political challenges involved have so few personal details interspersed that when a foray into a relationship or personal matter does appear, it can be almost jarring to the reader. Yet the details are relevant to a memoir—a form whose convention dictates personal reflections and musings—and all the more so to a memoir about food, the consumption of which has blurred the lines of the personal and the political for so many (Nestle, 2002).

Despite these flaws, *Organic Revolutionary* is a compelling and worthwhile read. Gershuny underscores why the fight for organic agriculture is still relevant: “market incentives alone cannot bring about the revolutionary social, political, and economic changes” (p. 202) that a sustainable food system requires. Her last chapter, titled “Growing Forward,” acknowledges that there is much left for

food activists to do, especially given organic agriculture's potential to mitigate climate change. In her epilogue, "Advice to a Young Food System Activist," she returns to the tension between purity and pragmatism in the organic regulations, urging tomorrow's advocates to resist the allure of succumbing to this dialectic and to remain steadfast in their commitment to a better future by being kind

and persistent—sound advice for all change-seekers and change-makers.



Reference

Nestle, M. (2002). *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition, and health*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.