Millennials are adopting organic in a big way: on the farm and on the Internet, in the kitchen and in the board room

When 32-year-old Carolina King takes her toddler Camila grocery shopping in their Washington, D.C., suburb, little Camila is on the lookout for organic. If the three-year-old doesn’t spot that organic seal, she announces to all within earshot, “If it’s not organic, we don’t buy it,” and the item doesn’t get into her mom’s shopping cart.

“She’s already converted to organic, and I’m really proud of that,” says King. “Plus Camila’s voice is so loud, other shoppers in the store hear it, and while they usually chuckle, I know it also gets them thinking.”

Camila comes by her early knowledge of organic from her mother, who has been feeding her and her younger sister Giuliana (14 months) organic since they were born. King describes herself as an “eco-friendly mama, trying to live a healthy life” and is a passionate proponent of organic products. She shares information about organic and other healthy products and ways of living on her successful blog site, MamalInstincts.com, which gets up to 100,000 views a month, and on her other social channels—Twitter, Facebook, Instagram—that have attracted some 15,000 followers.
King is the new and powerful face of organic: informed, motivated, connected, seeking a healthier lifestyle for herself and her family, and a millennial.

The U.S. Census Bureau puts the millennial population in this country at almost 75 million, the largest generation in America. There is no official definition of the birth dates of millennials, but for the purpose of this article, individuals in the 19- to 35-year age range in 2017 will be considered millennials.

This big, confident and Internet-savvy generation is just now coming into its own. Millennials are expected to make up half the U.S. workforce by 2020, and their purchasing power is climbing fast. Millennials are ethnically and culturally diverse, and are on track to be the most educated generation. They’ve grown up learning and sharing information on the Internet. They are aware of the increasing health and environmental challenges posed by conventional agriculture, and are seeing organic as the healthy alternative.

America’s millennials are devouring organic, and, like Carolina King, they’re making sure their families are, too. Various surveys have found that more millennials are buying organic products than any other generation. Millenial-aged parents are now the biggest group of organic buyers in America, according to a survey on the organic buying habits of American households released in 2016 by the Organic Trade Association (OTA).

Among U.S. parents, the OTA survey found that more than five in 10 (52 percent) organic buyers are millennials. Compared to millennials, Generation X parents (born between 1965-1980) made up 35 percent of parents choosing organic and baby boomers (born between 1946-1964) just 14 percent.

“The millennial consumer and head of household is changing the landscape of our food industry,” said Laura Batcha, CEO and Executive Director of the Organic Trade Association. “Millennial parents are choosing organic because they are more aware of the benefits of organic, they place a greater value on knowing how their food was grown and produced, and they are deeply committed to supporting a food system that sustains and nurtures the environment.”

**Millennials aren’t just enthusiastic consumers of organic. They are making their presence felt in the entire organic supply chain. Millennials are becoming organic farmers, organic researchers, organic entrepreneurs.**

A study conducted in late 2016 by the Pew Research Center found that more than six in 10 (61 percent) of U.S. millennials say organic produce is healthier than non-organic varieties, the most of any generational group.

Costa-Rica born millennial King is married to a Generation Xer, and she initially saw a difference in their attitudes towards the value of organic. “My husband is ten years older, so we sometimes have that generation gap,” she says. “At first he thought my concerns were ridiculous, but the more information I gave him, the more supportive he became. He, in fact, was the one who encouraged me to start my blog so I could share what I was learning with other interested parents.”

**BEYOND THE CONSUMER**
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“An incredible amount of opportunity in organic exists because you can enter the organic supply chain at any point,” says 25 year-old Nate Powell-Palm of Bozeman, Montana. “You don’t have to be a large scale operator or an established farmer to get into organic. I’ve seen so many mom-and-pop organic operations recently come in to the industry.”

Powell-Palm chose the farmer route, and, at his relatively tender age, already speaks from experience. Powell-Palm is a successful organic cattle producer and organic grain farmer in Montana. After obtaining his organic certification while a junior in high school, he was the state’s youngest certified organic farmer for several years. At 25, he’s still one of the youngest, and without a doubt, one the most determined and creative.

It’s not news that America’s farmers are aging. Farmers older than 65 are the fastest-growing group of farmers in the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But younger farmers ages 25 to 34 are the second fastest-growing segment. On a national basis, the proportion of young farmers under 35 is up by almost 3 percent, and that proportion—especially for organic farmers—is much higher in regions where land values are lower and organic farming is more prevalent, or in non-traditional farming areas such as urban locations where small-scale or high-tech organic farming is beginning to take hold.

**NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER’S FARMER**

Powell-Palm was born in Montana, the middle of five children. His father left a life in Chicago to marry his mother who, although not from a farming family, had grown up moving between the rural west and Chicago, before settling in Montana. His parents married and settled on a ten-acre plot outside of Bozeman. It was here where Powell-Palm and his siblings grew up, and where Nate was introduced to agriculture through his parents and the local 4-H community.

At nine, he and his seven-year-old brother took a 1,200-pound steer they’d raised and pastured on the family plot to the county fair. From then on, Powell-Palm knew he wanted to be in agriculture. At 12, the determined youth secured a junior ag loan from the Montana Department of Agriculture for $3,400. He bought three bred cows from his neighbor, and with the encouragement of his parents who were proponents of organic and sustainable agriculture, began to buy organic hay to feed his cattle from two local organic farmers who introduced him to the vibrant Montana organic community.
His interest in organic agriculture grew as he met more organic farmers around Montana and saw their enthusiasm for, and dedication to organic practices. Powell-Palm credits the “fantastic mentorship” of local and state organic producers for his success. “The mentorship of the Montana organic community allowed me to do everything I’ve done,” he says.

Today, Powell-Palm has a herd of just under 40 animals, and is leasing 1,200 acres of land around Bozeman and in Northern Wyoming that includes 100 acres of hay ground and 110 acres of irrigated grain, with the balance dedicated to perennial pastures for his cattle. He is president of the Montana Organic Producers Co-op, a rancher cooperative that collectively markets its members’ certified organic, grass fed cattle. The co-op supplies around 400 animals annually to Whole Foods and other wholesale buyers. In addition to working with the co-op, Powell-Palm is preparing to finalize a contract under which he and other producers will export 450 grass-fed, organic animals to the United Arab Emirates.

One of Powell-Palm’s key secrets to his success has been to avoid excessive risk and debt as much as possible. His junior ag loan, paid off long ago, was his first and only loan. He’s side-stepped land debt by leasing land, and contracts his farming so he has not had to make costly investments in farm equipment. He also forward contracts his grain crops and cattle early in the process to ensure income stability. “I always have a buyer before I put the seed in the ground.” he says.

Powell-Palm is convinced that organic is well-suited for young farmers looking to make a career in agriculture due to its added value, the ability to start on a small scale, and the option to forward contract products to eager organic buyers.

“I don’t come from a traditional farm and don’t have access to generational land. I would not be farming today without organic,” he says. “I, as a farmer in Bozeman, can make an income of around $50,000 a year on just 50 to 100 irrigated organic acres. You would need two to three times that amount of land in conventional.”

**TAKING ORGANIC RESEARCH TO FARMERS**

As a farmer, Powell-Palm is proud of going the organic route and wouldn’t have it any other way. As a millennial, he says he was not raised under the “cheap food is better” way of thinking, and that his parents instilled a higher level of awareness about how food is grown.

Meanwhile, that understanding and close-up experience with how food is raised, and the importance in agricultural communities of being able to produce a crop to pay the bills have shaped the trajectory of 35-year-old Amber Sciligo’s academic career.

Sciligo is Project Coordinator and Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of California Berkeley. Raised in a tiny rural community in California’s Central Valley, the millennial researcher spent most of her weekends and summers on her grandparents’ 20-acre almond farm. She worked on the farm and was in 4-H. She remembers that when the conventional farm was sprayed with pesticides, the family went to the other side of the house or to another area of the farm.

Steeped in the ways of non-organic agriculture and the culture of her small town, the daughter of a fifth-generation Californian, and the first of her family to go to college and leave the area, Sciligo eventually traveled to New Zealand where she earned her doctorate in ecology & evolution. On a tight food budget, Sciligo and her millennial husband began cooking from scratch and using local and seasonal produce that was abundant and relatively inexpensive in the region. She discovered organic and healthy eating.

Fast forward: the couple returns to California and to San Francisco’s Bay Area. Sciligo begins working with UC Berkeley Professor Claire Kremen on the role of diversified organic farming in increasing pollinator populations and the populations of other natural enemies, focusing on strawberry production. Note: California grows more than 80 percent of the total U.S. strawberry crop, and over 90 percent of the nation’s organic strawberries.
Sciligo’s work has since broadened to look at the whole organic farm system and to study in a comprehensive way the ecological, economic, environmental and social costs and benefits of implementing diversified farming techniques.

“The range of organic production is incredibly wide, and how we reach out to growers to partner with them for our studies is so important,” says Sciligo. “We’ve learned that focusing on just one element like pollinators is not always effective for farmers. This narrow approach is not feasible for practical farm management. My work has become much more whole-systems and diversified because of the organic farmers I’ve talked to and the needs I’ve seen.”

Most of the older members of Sciligo’s family still take her work “with a grain of salt,” she notes. “It’s such a different kind of agriculture than they know.” But not so with her younger 32-year-old sister. “My sister who is a millennial and a mom has been the most receptive to the work I do.” That said, Sciligo says her family’s influence and her rural community upbringing have enabled her to see experiences beyond the “academic bubble” and communicate with growers in a way in which she is able to learn from and apply their knowledge to her research and which, she hopes, resonates for them as well.

SECOND-GENERATION ORGANIC

“I like to think of many of these millennials as second generation organic,” said OTA’s Batcha. “A big part of this generation has grown up eating organic, and seeing that organic label. It’s not surprising that they have a greater knowledge of what it means to be organic, and consequently a greater trust of the organic label.”

Case in point is 25-year-old Emily McNamara. McNamara is the daughter of Craig McNamara, who is the owner of Sierra Orchards organic walnut farm in California, the current president of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture, and a well-respected organic and sustainable farming expert.

“I was born into organic,” says McNamara. “I grew up on a farm surrounded by trees but not a lot of neighbors, and the agricultural practices of my parents’ farm have always been rooted in sustainable and organic practices.”

McNamara pursued a Bachelor’s degree in environmental studies in the East, where she remembers how once a week throngs of students would gather at a building on campus to fill up their CSA boxes. She said there would be a short printed-out blurb about every grower, eagerly read by all. McNamara said it was exciting for her to share the experience of having fresh produce and a connection with the farmer with the other students.

After graduation, McNamara returned to California where she wanted to stay involved in the environmental sector. She particularly was concerned about food waste and its contribution to climate change. In her job search, she came across a company just getting off the ground named California Safe Soil (CSS) that had developed a breakthrough technology
that recycles organic food waste from supermarkets into a nutrient-rich liquid fertilizer. Through heat, mechanical action and enzymes, food that can no longer be sold or donated is turned in just three hours into a high quality and safe liquid fertilizer called Harvest-to-Harvest (H2H). The company makes both conventional and certified organic H2H, and McNama, who is now the Director of Marketing for CSS, says the organic fertilizer is outselling the conventional.

CSS explains that by developing a “digestion technology” many times more efficient than normal composting that can take three months, the food waste does not rot, which sharply reduces the risks of harboring pathogens and maintains significant benefits to soil organisms. This past fall, CSS opened a new production facility in McClellan, CA, with the capacity to recycle up to 32,000 tons of food waste a year and change that waste into fertilizer for 128,000 agricultural acres, in addition to creating 3,200 tons of sustainable livestock feed. The greenhouse gas emissions reduced by that conversion will be equivalent to taking 15,000 cars off the road every year.

“This position has inspired me to take agriculture to a new level. I never thought I’d be so involved in agriculture,” says McNamara. “There’s a real connection and passion in ag which I always saw in my dad. I’d like now to look into regenerative agriculture—nurturing farmers for the next generation, instead of just focusing on this year’s yield.”

**A PLOT OF LAND NOT NECESSARY**

Thirty-five-year-old organic brand specialist Gage Mitchell also considers himself a second-generation organic advocate. But the gene that created Mitchell’s appreciation for organic skipped a generation in his case, going from his grandma to him and bypassing his mother.

“My grandmother grew up on a farm in Nebraska,” says Mitchell. “By the time I knew her, she was in suburb of Denver but she had a gigantic garden in her backyard. We’d see the rhubarb growing, and see it get converted into rhubarb pies. She made everything from scratch. My interest in food, and in good, home-made food started with my grandmother.”

Mitchell’s mother was a self-employed business owner. “She worked all the time so we got take-out,” he says. That’s when he learned to cook for his three siblings and his friends. “I didn’t know the difference between organic and non-organic then, but I liked fresh food and real food.”

Today Mitchell runs Modern Species, a Seattle-based sustainable brand design studio that he and his millennial wife founded in 2009. The company’s primary focus is on organic and natural product companies. Modern Species only works with clients who have some sort of sustainable or social impact mission, and when working with them, Mitchell says, “we always consider the ethical, environmental and economic impact of our/their decisions to help them execute their brand in alignment with their mission.”

Mitchell sees an exciting future ahead for millennials and organic: more organic food and other organic products to choose from, and more opportunities to become a part of the organic supply chain.

“The fact that I’m able to have a design studio working with only organic and natural is amazing. There can be hundreds more companies like mine,” he says. “In every avenue, whether it’s a creative field like mine, or more of a bricks and mortar company, you don’t have to have a plot of land to go organic. You can use your degree in college and work for a company—or form your own company—with the values of organic.”
The millennial population is expected to peak in another 20 years at around 81 million. As this generation ages, becomes more prosperous, creates new careers that align with its values, and flexes its voting muscle, the millennial influence on the food and agriculture system will only grow. Millennials and organic—a winning combination that is here to stay, and that is changing the landscape for future generations.