

Dawnula Koukol, catering chef for Café Flora in Madison Valley, said it's still too expensive to use only organic products.

Café Flora does, however, provide organic tofu year-round and has rotating selections of other organic options.

Although it's still too expensive to provide a totally organic menu, "we get a lot of customer comments about wanting to have more organic items," she said. "We try our best."

Changing your diet

But according to Debra Boutin, clinic nutrition coordinator at Bastyr University, there are ways to get around the high prices.

Boutin suggests exploring the bulk bins for things like grains, seeds, nuts, dried fruits, rice and granola - they tend to be cheaper, and you can consult a cookbook for preparation tips.

Since organic meats tend to be pricey, try minimizing the portions. Use meat as a side dish instead of a main course, and fill your plate instead with grains or produce.

Invest in organic seeds and plants, she also said, and grow your own organics. Even if you don't have space for gardening, some greens and herbs can easily grow in pots or small areas.

She also suggests eating organic "in" instead of eating out, since eating organic is still less expensive than eating out on a regular basis.

Boutin also points out that farmers markets - of which there are plenty in the area - usually have great prices.

Buying locally

Not only do local farmers markets have great prices, they offer a good selection of locally grown, organic products.

And depending on the season and price, most retailers say they buy locally when they can.

It's especially important for the local, independent stores, they say, to buy from local farmers because they, too, rely on the community for support.

Most of the produce at Madison Market in the Central Area is organic and local, with a very small portion of nonorganics. Shoppers only expand to non-local farmers if there's something they can't get locally, said general manager Reese Williams.

Madison Market recently began carrying organic Angus beef from Skagit River Ranch in Sedro-Woolley, but the store sometimes needs to go outside of the state for other meats.

Similarly, Mark Smith, of Rainbow Grocery on Capitol Hill, said his store buys from as many local farmers as possible, depending on the business and season. Most of his bread is local, as well as his gifts and honey selection.

But the big guys do a good job of supporting local farmers as well.

"We're always on the lookout" for special products that are available locally, said Ron Megahan, Northwest regional president for Whole Foods. "We look for wherever the best product is."

Whole Foods gets a lot of their vegetables and fruit locally, he said.

The store found local farmer Ted Geory, who supplies Whole Foods with apples and pear when he pulled up to the Roosevelt store with a truck full of apples. And the store gets its raspberries from Monroe.

"We're constantly on the lookout for farmers," he added.

Farming locally

Andrew Stout, owner of Full Circle Farm in Carnation, is one of those farmers.

A first-generation, certified-organic farm, Full Circle Farm supplies fresh vegetables and herbs to PCC, Whole Foods, Madison Market, Rainbow Grocery, Café Flora, Carmelita, Cascadia, Lark, The Stumbling Goat, as well as other restaurants and many of the farmers markets.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Stout worked as a landscaper. But he and his wife - a vegetarian - "decided we wanted to do something a little different," he said.

And in 1996, they did. That June, Stout went to local restaurants and markets and gave them his pitch. Not too long after, he called those places and took orders.

"It has steadily climbed" since then, Stout said.

The farm started with just about 3 acres, with sales around \$45,000. Now, they have about 150 acres, and he anticipates sales of around \$2 million.

"The community around here has just embraced healthy living," he said.

Their location, about 30 miles outside of Seattle, also has put them at an advantage. They chose the location because they didn't want to commute too far from their Capitol Hill home.

Stout, who lived in Wisconsin and Minnesota before coming to Seattle, thinks people in the area have more "sophistication in our palette." We don't just eat salmon, we eat Copper River salmon, he explained.

He also credits the popularity of healthy and organic eating to the prevalence of higher education: People are more aware of what they're eating and take better care of their bodies, he said.

The success of the organic industry in Seattle "is a carryover from the success of the city," he said, citing The Boeing Co., Microsoft and Starbucks. The city just attracts young, educated decision-makers, he said.

Learning to eat healthily

Sixty years ago, Stout said, everyone had a garden and grew healthy foods to eat, but after World War II, healthy eating and living was replaced with convenience.

Now, he said, people are traveling more: They are going to Europe and seeing that people don't just eat to satisfy their hunger; they eat because they enjoy it.

"People are excited about eating now," he said. "That is very alluring to Seattleites."

In places like Europe, Stout said, people spend around 33 percent of their money on food in the United States, we only spend about 11 percent.

But "we're paying for it in different ways," he said, with high insurance rates and environmental impacts.

Eating organic "shouldn't be an elitist thing," he said.

Since there's now a trend toward healthy living, he added, what used to be the norm is now being questioned.

They're even taking organic eating to schools.

Stout is currently working with Washington State University and the Washington Department of Agriculture to establish a curriculum about healthy eating. In addition, Full Circle Farm has been selling vegetables to the Bellevue and Seattle School Districts.

Teaching healthy eating early is important. You give a man a fish he can eat for a day, Stout said, but teach a man to fish and he can eat for a lifetime.

To the doorstep

Boistfort Valley Organic Farm in Curtis has been around for a little longer: They've been delivering organics straight from the farm to local neighborhoods since 1988.

Mike Peroni and his wife own and operate a community-supported agriculture program (CSA), using produce from their own farm. According to Peroni, the Northwest is a sort of mecca of CSA programs.

With his program, people sign up at the beginning of the year and purchase a share to get deliveries from the farm for 20 weeks.

Each week, the Peronis deliver their food, along with recipes and flowers from their farm, to local doorsteps.

The produce varies from week to week. Recently, the delivery consisted of two types of lettuce, green beans, yellow beans, summer squash, garlic, basil, snow peas, gladiolas and lilies.

Like others, Peroni attributes the success of organics in the area to the people who live here.

"I think the people are forward-thinking here," he said. "There is enormous support for local agriculture" and for the little guy in this part of the country, he added.

Who's eating it?

So who are these people who eat organic? Health-conscious families? Single apartment dwellers? Young, married couples? The short answer: all of the above.

The clientele at both Madison Market and Rainbow Grocery is the same: "It's probably as diverse as the neighborhood we serve," Williams said.

People who eat organic can't be put into one category. According to Crane, the clientele ranges according to store. The Fremont PCC store gets a lot of single people who don't buy as much, while their Issaquah store sees a lot of full shopping carts with kids sitting in the front basket.

But she also added that most of PCC's customers tend to be more educated.

Bastyr also sees all kinds of students. According to the school's Web site, the median age is around 32 but they come from all sorts of backgrounds and careers, Warren said.

Not only is Warren involved in teaching about eating naturally, she's dedicated to doing it herself.

"Those are the choices that I make," she said, adding that while some families may choose digital cable or make a new car a financial priority, eating organically is what's important for her and her family.

Eric Nelsen, an attorney and Central Area resident and the board president at Madison Market, has been shopping at the store since about 1995.

"There's definitely been a big change in the last 10 years," he said about the organic industry.

He thinks it is partly because people are realizing that, as far as their bodies and health, there are things we can't control, so it makes sense to take control of something we can.

It's about passion

So why are organics so popular in this corner of the country? There's no short, statistical answer. But most say it's simply about the people who live here.

The people who sell, grow and eat organically are dedicated to it - it's not just a career or a lifestyle, but a passion. According to Peroni, he didn't even choose it as a career, he said: "It's like it chose me."

And like so many other Washingtonians and Seattleites who embrace organics, Smith looks forward to what's in store: "The future definitely is bright for us."