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## Organic food is a waste of money

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Food marketers and estate agents have much in common. Both use words of inappropriate grandiosity to sell distinctly average products. Where most of us see a shed, estate agents see a Swedish-timber summer outhouse. Where most of us see a burger, food marketers see a grass-fed, Highland-reared steak haché.

Usually found on the supermarkets' premium brands, these fanciful descriptions are designed to encourage us to part with a little bit more of our hard-earned cash. But do these supposedly superior products offer anything more than fancy packaging? *Times Money* decided to investigate.

Over the past fortnight, we have been conducting a blind taste test to establish whether it is really worth paying extra for the supermarkets' standard, premium and organic ranges. To ensure that we were unbiased, we chose foods that were hard to tell apart by appearance alone, such as chicken breasts, apples, broccoli, tea, white wine and yoghurt. The **results** are surprising, but perhaps not for the reasons that you might expect.

For a start, the difference in taste between the supermarkets' cheapest ranges was huge. Overall, Waitrose's Essentials range was judged to be by far the tastiest of all the ranges at all of the supermarkets. The Sainsbury's Basics range, however, was judged to be by far the worst of all. But the most revealing result is how badly organic food performed.

The organic brands at Tesco, Waitrose and Asda scored worse than each supermarket's basic, standard and premium ranges. Only at Sainsbury's did organic food not come bottom, and that was only because its Basics range is so bad. Hard though it may be to believe, Asda's standard range scored higher than Waitrose's organic range.

Remember, this was a completely blind test — we had no idea what we were tasting, we simply gave each food a mark out of ten based on how much we liked it. Of course, taste is purely subjective and our experiment did not have the scale or scientific rigour to be conclusive. Nonetheless, the results are fascinating and suggest that it is not worth paying extra for organic food. (Which? estimates that organic food costs on average 60 per cent more than conventional produce).

Inevitably, the organic lobby will dismiss our findings. The Soil Association, which relies on brand organic for its livelihood, defends the industry with a passion that borders on blind faith. But the arguments that it uses are spurious at best.

The idea that organic food is worth more because it is healthier is totally bogus. Only last month the Food Standards Agency, the unbiased government agency set up to protect the public's health, published a report concluding that organic food has no greater nutritional value than conventional produce.

The idea that organic food is better for the environment is also questionable. Organic milk, for example, generates more carbon dioxide emissions than standard milk and uses significantly more land.

Then there is the pesticide question. High doses can indeed cause cancer and birth defects. However, there is no evidence that the miniscule amounts found in conventional food are harmful. In fact, some studies have shown that the incidence of cancer among farmers, who are routinely exposed to relatively high levels of pesticide, is lower than in the wider population. In the past 50 years, since synthetic chemicals have come into wide use, average life expectancy has increased by more than seven years.

The origins of the myth that organic is somehow better are complex — in part a result of recent food scares that have made consumers suspicious of modern farming methods, and in part a result of tireless campaigning by pressure groups that exploit the media's desire for sensationalist headlines.

Support for organic farming seems based on the belief that “nature knows best”. Sadly, this is little more than nostalgia for a golden age of small-scale and simple farming that never really existed. Before intensive agriculture, pesticides and artificial fertilisers, food supplies were constantly endangered by drought and disease. Agriculture was associated with grinding poverty, intensive labour and low yield.

Of course, this is not to say that all organic food should be avoided. The animal welfare standards of organic farmers are generally considered better than average. And as our test demonstrates, some organic foods, such as burgers, do seem to taste better. But consumers should be aware that with organic food in general, they are not paying a premium for real quality, just the perception of such.