



ISDSI CHIANG MAI URBAN SUSTAINABILITY STUDENT STUDY: FALL, 2009

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TITLE: Organic Produce Availability in Chiang Mai Supermarkets

REPORT: The goal of our study was to survey the availability of certifiable organic produce in Chiang Mai supermarkets.

In our study we looked for organic fruit and vegetables in supermarkets found on a tourist map. We achieved a cross section of the market by visiting hypermarkets, supermarkets and stores specifically listed as specializing in organic produce. We did not study open-air markets. We did not look at organic dairy products, eggs, meats or dry goods. We did not go to outdoor markets or roadside stands. Our study was conducted during midday hours, between 1 and 5 p.m. on weekdays. We considered produce to be organic if labeling marked it that was understandable in English.

The methods through which we went about gathering the data included finding supermarkets using Nancy Chandler's Map of Chiang Mai (Nov. 2008), observing the produce department of each store looking for organic labeling, recording product type, price, quality, place of origin and variety when available. We also asked store employees about organic produce to assess their knowledge and helpfulness. In addition we observed customer behavior, and used modern fashion sensibilities to infer customer demographics. We also considered Royal Product Foundation produce although we did not consider it organic unless labeled as such.

We visited two hypermarkets, Tesco Lotus and Carrefour, two specialty supermarkets, Tops and Rimping, one bulk sales store, Makro, and three stores listed specifically as organic markets on the map. These stores, J. Imboon, Pun Pun and Royal Project Foundation could either not be found, or did not offer organic produce.

Tesco Lotus, Makro, Carrefour, Tops and Rimping all sold organic produce and were all well known by song tao drivers. Between asking store employees and reading English labeling, the organic products were easily found. Our limited Thai language skills meant we could not judge the clarity of labeling to non-English speakers. In all cases organic produce was packaged in plastic, refrigerated and priced per unit. When a non-organic substitute was available it was generally unpackaged, and priced per kilo. Most organic options cost about twice as much as substitutes, although in some cases the disparity was greater. For example, yellow bell peppers at Tops cost nine times more for organic peppers than for non-organic peppers.

In addition to organic practices, Royal Project Foundation and hydroponic produce were widely advertised. In every store produce from the Royal Project Foundation was available. Some of these were organic, but the main focus seems to be helping rural Thais engage in sustainable agriculture. This involves providing alternatives to slash and burn, teaching integrated pest management and several other outreach efforts. Three stores offered two brands of hydroponic greens. Both companies were based in Chiang Mai province. The wide availability of these two options, as well as various forms of safe vegetable certification seems to indicate an awareness of food supply issues and a generally progressive mindset among producers. However, there is no singular demarcation of a Thai national standard for organic produce.

The widest selection of organic food was found in the Rimping specialty supermarket. They offered both organic greens and three or four varieties of fruits (oranges and apples).

We conclude that organic produce is technically widely available in Chiang Mai. Organic produce was primarily available at stores only accessible by vehicle and generally cost twice as much as substitutes. This means that eating organically is an option only for the affluent. The limited selection rules out eating a primarily organic diet. The excessive packaging and predominance of imported organic produce seems to indicate that even when it is available, organic produce may not be the most sustainable option. Furthermore, the lack of a national organic standard means that a consumer can't be sure of what organic labeling means.

For a continuation of this study, we would suggest having an interpreter to read Thai on packaging, visiting every supermarket in Chiang Mai, contacting the Thai organic certification groups to understand their certification standards and receiving organic produce inventories from supermarkets.



Store	Organic Produce	Royal Project	Accessible on Foot	Store easy to Find	Produce Easy to find in store	Signs in English	Organic Produce Clearly Marked	Selection	Store Type
Tesco Lotus	x	x		x	x	x		3	Mega store
Carrefour	x	x		x	x	x	x	5	Mega store
Makro	x	x		x				6	Bulk Sales
Tops	x	x		x	x	x	x	8	High End Supermarket
Royal Project Store		x	x	x	x			1	Specialty Supermarket
Pun Pun			x					n/a	Specialty Store
J. Imboon			x					n/a	Specialty Store
Rimping	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	9	Specialty Supermarket