



The Time is Ripe

Julia Plevin checks out the natural food movement. Time to go organic.

It does not take an expert to see that Hanoi has its fill of environmental issues. All you have to do is breathe to realise that the air is polluted. Food, even though it may be locally grown and tastes fresh, can also be contaminated and potentially unhealthy. Even if people are aware of the chemicals and fertilizers that are used in food production, they often feel there is nothing they can do but wash and peel their produce carefully.

Nguyen Thuy Anh, who works at an environmental conservation NGO, is well aware that non-organic fruits and vegetables are laden with industrial residue, pesticides, fungicides and fertilizers. But, she says, "If you eat, you have to accept the situation. We know, but what can we do?"

Several factors lead to this attitude. There is scepticism that so called 'organic' and clean vegetables are just the same as other vegetables, only with a new label. Then there is convenience. People tend to go to the same market every day rather than going out of their way to buy 'organic'. Still, is there something that can be done to bring healthy fruits and vegetables to Hanoi's residents? A few local organisations are trying to provide a healthy and tasty answer to this question by making it easier for Hanoians to buy natural foods.

○ Taking Action

Action For the City is a locally run organisation that addresses issues of climate change and seeks to improve the quality of life in Hanoi. For them, the benefits of organic produce far outweigh the difficulties involved. In mid-2008, with some funding from AUSAID, Action For the City approached a group of farmers in Soc Son District who had been growing

"safe vegetables" (vegetables grown with a government-deemed safe level of chemicals), and asked if the farmers wanted to try to make organic produce profitable. The farmers agreed to join the project and sell their produce with a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model, in which customers receive a bag full of assorted seasonal vegetables.

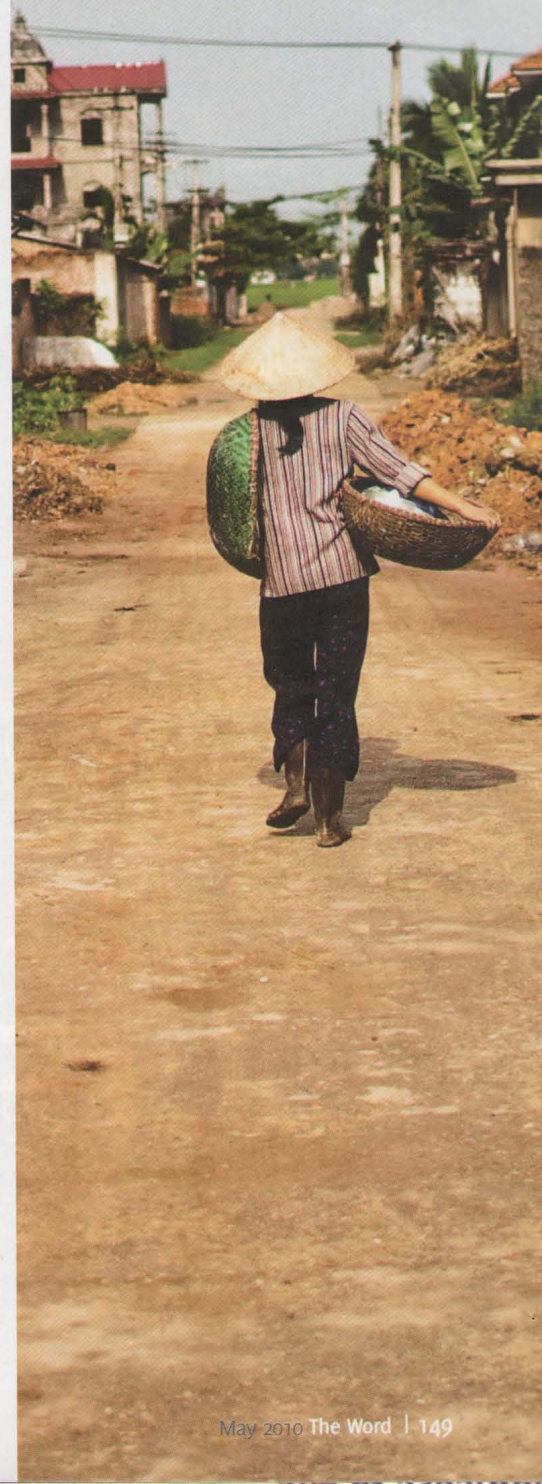
I was wary of the CSA model because I would not want to receive a bag of mystery vegetables. But, Action For The City has already addressed that issue. A monthly newsletter includes relevant recipes and a vegetable identification card. Moreover, they give different bags to Vietnamese and foreigners because, as Action For The City's business development officer Tamara Baillie explains, Vietnamese people love leafy greens while overseas residents want aubergine, capsicum and other vegetables that are not commonly used in Vietnamese cuisine.

Farmers have to work harder under a CSA model because they bag up the orders themselves. The orders are delivered via motorbike to various pick-up points in Hanoi, including Zenith Yoga, Just Massage and some embassies, international NGOs, and other offices. While they work hard, the farmers say they are happier growing organic produce. According to Baillie, "The farmers feel like they have better health and have averaged a 300 percent increase in income because they can charge more for organic vegetables."

Action For The City also offers tours to the organic farms once a quarter so that Hanoians can visit Thanh Xuan Commune to pick vegetables, eat lunch and relax. As farmers and customers interact, they start to build a relationship of trust – farmers meet the people



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who enjoy their produce and customers begin to understand where their food comes from.

Action For The City is continually working to expand the reach of its organic produce and make it more accessible. Right now they are figuring out ways to sustainably increase production because demand is currently greater than supply. Restaurants, hotels, schools, workplace kitchens and natural markets are all eager for organic vegetables.

◉ Naturally Vietnam

The new Saturday market that takes place from 10am to 12.30pm at ASVELIS Headquarters (98 To Ngoc Van) focuses on other types of organic food products. This market was created as part of a USAID-funded project to stop avian influenza by producing "Naturally Vietnam" free-range chickens. Bui Duc Tri is project co-ordinator for ASVELIS (Asian Veterinary & Livestock Services), one of the three organisations working to implement this project. He found me at the market while I was sampling some creamy Tomme cheese from Moc Chau.

Bui led me around the area, which was slowly filling with Vietnamese and foreign families shopping, chatting and eating. He introduced me to the sellers and explained the importance of natural foods as I eagerly stopped by each stand to sample some of the goods. I enjoyed fair trade cashews from Better Day, a macaroon from Maison Vanille bakery, all-natural passion fruit juice made in Can Tho by Le Fruit, and too much of Laurent Sevarac's fruit wine for a Saturday morning. Finally we approached the market's *raison d'être* - the free-range chicken and eggs.

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but I could not help but let out an excited "mmm!" as I sampled a piece of "Naturally Vietnam" roasted chicken. Not only did this chicken taste a thousand times better than the rubbery version found in *pho ga*, it was also environmentally friendly and safe. From streamlined record keeping to biosecurity practices, veterinary supervision, and small scale slaughtering, accountability and sustainability are considered at every step of this chicken's life.

Surprise inspections and market incentives help to ensure that farmers maintain the correct practices even when no one is watching. Farmers get a higher price for natural chickens and no longer have to submit to the will of traders because their chickens are in great demand throughout the country, especially at high-end hotels like the Victoria Sapa Resort.

Bui tried to show me some free-range eggs, but was happily surprised that they were all sold out. While the USAID funded project is almost over, he is optimistic that the natural food movement and this weekend market will continue to grow.

"The only cost is printing fliers," Bui concludes with a confidence that makes me believe there is a food revolution coming to Hanoi.

NGOs can provide the impetus for changes in food production, but real change can only occur with the popular support of Hanoi residents.

For more information on Action for the City, go to www.vidothi.org or visit them at 1 Pham Ngu Lao, Hoan Kiem. Information on the Saturday market can be obtained from ASVELIS. Call 3718 5475 or go to www.asvelis.com. 