

# Earth-Friendly Chocolate & Organic Baby Food

From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

**D**ear EarthTalk: I heard a reference to "earth-friendly chocolate" and was wondering about what goes into chocolate that would raise environmental concerns. — Ben Moran, Providence, RI

Like coffee beans, the cacao seeds from which we derive chocolate can only be grown successfully in equatorial regions, right where the world's few remaining tropical rainforests thrive. As worldwide demand for chocolate grows, so does the temptation among growers to clear more and more rainforest to accommodate high-yield monocultural (single-crop) cacao tree plantations. What are left are open, sunny fields with dramatically lower levels of plant and animal diversity. Adding environmental insult to injury, most cacao plantations use copious amounts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and fungicides that further degrade the land that once teemed with a wide variety of rare birds, mammals, and plants.

Another problem with chocolate production, although not specifically an environmental concern, is the conditions

endured by workers that pick and process the cacao seeds. The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture has documented some 284,000 children between the ages of nine and 12 working in hazardous conditions on West African cacao farms. In Africa's Ivory Coast, for example, where more than 40 percent of the world's cacao is grown, underage cacao workers are routinely overworked, performing often-dangerous farming tasks in a setting that some liken to slavery. As a result of these and other related injustices, so-called "fair trade" advocates have targeted large producers of cacao to improve working conditions and pay living wages that allow workers to get their kids out of the fields and into school.

Some cacao farmers have enlisted the help of scientists and environmental groups to find ways to produce chocolate more fairly and more sustainably. The non-profit Rainforest Alliance, which works on similar issues with coffee growers, is now partnering with cacao growers in Ecuador to develop environmentally and socially responsible cacao production and processing standards. The standards seek to maintain critical conservation areas, reduce pressures to convert more forestland to cacao plantations, and

provide social and economic benefits to local communities. As a result, some 2,000 cacao growers in five Ecuadorian communities have now formed cooperatives that help find new markets for their products while overseeing adherence to fair labor standards and environmental protection measures. Rainforest Alliance hopes to expand the program to other cacao growing regions of the world in the coming years.

Those looking to get their hands on some organically grown fair trade chocolate have more options than ever before. Leading brands include Dagoba, Endangered Species, Equal Exchange, Green & Black's, Sjaak's, Sunspire, Terra Nostra Divine, Theo, Sweet Earth, and Yachana Gourmet. Actor Paul Newman has gotten in on the act, too, with his Newman's Own brand. Like Newman's Own, many of the companies donate money to environmental and other non-profit efforts. Whole Foods and other natural foods retailers stock many of these brands, which are also available via various Internet-based retailers including Global Exchange's Fair Trade Online Store.

For more information, visit the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture at [www.iita.org](http://www.iita.org) or Global Exchange's Fair Trade Online Store at [www.gxonlinestore.org](http://www.gxonlinestore.org).

**D**ear EarthTalk: I want to give my baby fresh, organic food, but I don't have the time to make her special meals. What options are out there? — Marie L.

Babies deserve the best possible start in life, so giving them nutritious food is a must, not only for good health but also to establish positive eating habits as early as possible.

According to Consumers Union (CU), publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine, commercial baby foods, many of which are made up of condensed fruits and vegetables, can contain high concentrations of pesticide residues. "A lot of these pesticides are toxic to the brain," says Philip Landrigan, a professor of pediatrics and preventative medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. Citing studies that have linked smaller head circumference and reduced intelligence in babies to in-utero exposure to pesticides consumed by their mothers, Landrigan says it is best not to gamble when it comes to baby food.

If you're not already serving organic



baby food, CU urges making the switch as soon as possible. A 2005 study ordered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency measured pesticide levels in the urine of 23 children in Washington State before and after a switch to an organic diet. After five straight days on the diet, pesticide measures fell to undetectable levels and remained so until the conventional diets resumed. The study concluded: "An organic diet provides a dramatic and immediate protective effect" against pesticide exposure.

Fortunately for concerned parents, the organic food industry is growing rapidly, and one result is the availability of a wide selection of organic baby foods in both natural food stores and mainstream supermarkets. Some leading jar- and box-based choices come from Gerber, Earth's Best, Homemade Baby, and others. And frozen meals from the likes of Happy Baby, Plum Organics, Bobo Baby, and other relative upstarts mix good flavor and fresh healthy ingredients with convenience. Using the power of cold temperatures to keep their foods fresh allows these companies to avoid the use of traditional preservatives.

Happy Baby's frozen meals come in individual cubes in flavors like "Baby Dahl and Mama Grain," an organic mixture of bananas, black beans, and quinoa. Qui-

noa is a high-protein whole grain that is considered a complete protein because it contains all eight essential amino acids.

Plum Organics offers flash-frozen, nutrient-rich organic meals that come in reusable four-ounce cups in varieties like "Super Greens" (peas, spinach, and green beans) and "Red Lentil Veggie" (potatoes, carrots, corn, and red lentils). Bobo Baby specializes in organic, kosher, and allergen-free flash-frozen baby meals.

For parents inclined toward cooking instead of opening jars or microwaving, making baby food out of fresh organic ingredients does not have to be complicated or time-consuming. Fresh Baby sells cooking kits, cookbooks, and food trays to help parents concoct and serve the freshest and healthiest baby food possible right from their own kitchens.

For more information, visit [www.earthsbest.com](http://www.earthsbest.com), [www.homemadebaby.com](http://www.homemadebaby.com), [www.happybaby.com](http://www.happybaby.com), [www.bobobaby.com](http://www.bobobaby.com), [www.plumorganics.com](http://www.plumorganics.com), or [www.freshbaby.com](http://www.freshbaby.com).

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