

## Interview With Cornucopia's Mark Kastel

**Host:** Welcome to Spirit in Action. My name is Mark Helpsmeet. Each week I'll be bringing you stories of people living lives of fruitful service of peace, community, compassion, creative action and progressive efforts. I'll be tracing the spiritual roots that support and nourish them in their service, hoping to inspire and encourage you to sink deep roots and produce sacred fruit in your own life.

Many of you know the word cornucopia but fewer of you probably know the tiny town of Cornucopia, Wisconsin or the organization birthed in Wisconsin called the Cornucopia Institute. Cornucopia is a symbol of abundance; a perfect connection to an Organization dedicated to preserving the natural riches of organic food and producers; real food grown by real people, often family farms with real integrity.

Co-founded by our guest, Mark Kastel along with another fine force for food integrity Will Fantle, the Cornucopia Institute is now 7,000 member strong working across the USA as a watchdog on the quality of the most basic of human needs, our food. Mark Kastel of the Cornucopia Institute joins us by phone from rural Southwest Wisconsin.

**Host:** Mark, I'm very happy to have you here today for Spirit in Action.

**Mark Kastel:** Thank you, Mark.

**Host:** Cornucopia Institute has been functioning how long now?

**Mark Kastel:** We are about to have our 9<sup>th</sup> birthday and entering to our 10<sup>th</sup> year so relatively young in comparison to some other public interest groups that work on food and farming but we started because there was a bit of gap in the oversight of the organic industry and we can never want it for abundance of work.

**Host:** It seems to me that you have at least a dual thrust. Organics clearly are at the heart of what you're doing. But the family farm is also important. Could you explain the overview of what Cornucopia is about?

**Mark Kastel:** Sure. We are a farm policy research group. Our overall goal is to promote the ecological wisdom that's inherent in the organic farming movement. It also is one of the best social and economic justice vehicles to come along in a number of decades as we've seen as rapacious capitalistic structure squeeze out family farmers. We simultaneously seen massive escalation in the use of toxic agri-chemicals that are now polluting our surface and ground water, our drinking water, crudes to the air and soil in rural America. It even pollutes the rainwater in rural America. So we've seen this massive shift in the predominant paradigm of food production in this country along with the shift to a different kind of production model for farming and I should remind your listeners that virtually all farmers in the United States were family farmers and organic farmers prior to World War 2. So we've seen that shift in farm production; we've seen that shift to highly processed food. And then we've seen this newer trend and I'll use the

shorthand “organics” but there are other communications vehicles and what we might refer to more globally as the good food movement. So there’s local food, people connecting in their own food shed and keeping their dollars local and getting truly fresh food. There’s the CSA movement; Community Sponsored Agriculture where consumers contract directly with farmers and actually absorb some of the risk they invest in the farm on a seasonal basis and then receive a box of fresh food throughout the growing season.

So all these wrapped up, but I’ll use organics as a shorthand because most of the agricultural practitioners involved in this value added higher quality hand crafted production are using organics whether its founded at local member of food co-op, or the farmers market, or your CSA box or online. Most of it’s organic. So we’ve seen this trend of citizens in this country that really don’t trust the FDA and the USDA to bless our food anymore. We do see all these food safety scares in terms of very virulent strains like e.coli we see the chemicals residues in our food. They tell us no cause for alarm but not all of us believe that and we see generic engineering, which has been grossly oversold economically for farmers and has received virtually no long term testing in terms of human health either on lab animals or humans themselves. We just don’t test for it. So folks are opting out. They’re voting in the marketplace for a different kind of food production and they’re winning and now were seeing, you know, even in these terms that we communicate with because of economic value to them being co-opted and that might be the good segway to talk about the spiritual connection to our food because for a lot of these consumers that are motivated to be more conscious in terms of their food selection there is a spiritual component. They’re really reconnecting with the earth as the most intimate thing we do really in our commercial lives at least is by food.

**Host:** When we were talking before we started recording you mentioned your co-director and senior farm policy analyst for the Cornucopian Institute and you’re almost chief theologian so the spirituality of food has a special place for you?

**Mark Kastel:** It does very much personally. I would suggest as an integral part of this movement the reason that I might be almost the number one theologian is Charlotte Valleys, our Director of farm and food policy who’s located- works out of the Boston area. She has advanced degrees from Tufts in terms of food science and food policy but she has advanced degree from Harvard in theology with an emphasis on environmental ethics so that’s a really good fit for Cornucopia and I’ll defer to her for the official doctrine on the connection between food and spirituality.

So I’ll just give you my personal take on this if I may, Mark. I like to say we know why people first come to organics. And it’s selfish and there’s nothing wrong with that. It’s really based on instinct and old brain chemistry. After all we’ve gone to war with different peoples over food during most of our species history. We’ve spent most of our waking day gathering, cooking, preserving, gathering the firewood and the water to prepare our meals. And if weren’t doing that, were usually worried about food and where our next food would come from and if we could preserve the food without spoiling. Food was our lives. That’s kind of a joke I give to people who come into my home. And food

is my life. I do it professionally but when I'm not on duty, I'm worrying about food. And I'm dealing with it and there's the certain joy to being more conscious. And although the initial motivations are selfish and they're instinctual especially when there are children involved. We want the very best food, the very best nutrition; the safest possible food.

So even when we are driven by those instinctual cues, the reason in our focus-group work at Cornucopia that we've determined there is such little price resistance to the premiums people are paying for organics. It's growing rapidly. Even, in general, when we've had bad economic times it's continued to grow and that's because people- They don't just feel they're being selfish. They're certainly cognizant of that, but they think they're simultaneously doing something good for society. So they think that built right into that price is economic justice for the families who produce our food. They think they're supporting a different kind of environmental ethic and a different kind of animal husbandry model; a more humane model. So there's a lot of values built into that organic label and that higher price. One of the problems we see now is that as corporate agri-businesses taken over so much of the organic market.

Consumers are feeling betrayed. So is it really organic milk if it comes from a 7,000 cow dairy (or 9,000 cow its grown to in Texas) in the desert and then shipping milk all over the country. That doesn't sound like it's organic. If the people involved are hard working and sadly exploited immigrants living in trailers out in the desert heat, that doesn't sound like supporting family farmers. If that milk is shipped from Texas across the country and then undercuts family farmers, there's no economic justice there. And how about imports from China or Kazakhstan undercutting our family farmers. We have Chinese soybeans coming in and a number of other products. We don't even trust the Chinese for ingredients in our dog and cat food any longer, let alone what we are feeding to our children. So Cornucopia has become an industry watch dog to make sure that the values that represent the organic label are not sold out for a quick buck and corporate profits.

**Host:** So when you're talking about the kind of the hole that you're filling, that you're plugging in organic standards, you're talking about this wider selection of items? I mean it maybe organic technically in some way but are the standards that have been promulgated by FDA for organic, are they widely exploited? Are they always looking for the loophole?

**Mark Kastel:** Sadly, I think yes. We've really evolved into two organic labels. And I wanna just mildly correct you. It's the USDA that oversees organics. The FDA oversees a lot of our food safety and food production but in terms of farming, and that's where the organic foods production act of 1990 passed by congress really falls under. So we really have seen this now bifurcated organic system. When I first got involved in the commercial organic sector in the 1980s and it was small. It was really dominated by farmers either direct marketing or farmers direct to food co-ops and independently owned natural food stores, they were really the pioneers in making the connections. There was no such thing as Whole Foods and you certainly couldn't walk into a Safeway and find anything organic. So it was really a loving collaboration between farmers and consumers who were willing to pay them a fair price. And then there was the smattering of

entrepreneurs that basically ran small companies but they were one of us. They came out of- We did not even call it the organic industry then. We called it the organic community.

And since then we've had companies like Dean Foods, the largest milk bottler in the country buy Horizon Organic and Silk, General Mills. You'll never see the name Dean Foods on Horizon or Silk, or General Mills on Cascadian Farms or your Glenn Tomato products. You'll see, in their case Small Planet Foods. For Dean Foods you'll see White Wave. So if I may, they're hiding behind a façade. And our co-director Will Fantle, he likes to use the term "They know what we're hungry for". You know we're not just buying that food, we're buying the story behind the food. And they don't want General Mills mucking up that story. That makes it complicated. So Small Planet Food just sounds a whole heck of a lot better.

So we now have this dual system. Do I trust Organics? Well it's still the best even with its warts. It's the best food labeling, food oversight system. It's the gold standard. There really isn't anything else. And that's why it's worth fighting for. But there are two levels here now. The one path organics has gone down is the one that's always been the path that it started on and that's if you're meeting an organic farmer at your farmer's market and shaking his or her hand and looking into his or her eyes you got a really intimate contract and contact with that farmer. Most of them will say if you ask them questions 'bout their production, "Hey, common out and see how our chickens live." Or "See how we're doing soil fertility for vegetable production."

You know this is where if you have a CSA box or you're showing up at the farmer's market, your vegetables were probably harvested 10 hours ago. Not 10 days ago in California on an industrial scale farm even though they were labeled organic. So that's a really trustworthy level, the direct marketing level. And then there are some really wonderful family-owned usually independent businesses that have never really lost their vision in what's organic about. And I can just throw a couple of 'em out. Nature's Path is the largest organic cereal manufacturer and granola manufacturer and I think they do things like bars and they're diversifying a little bit. But it's still owned by the same family that founded them. They're constantly getting contacts from venture capitalism, other industrials trying to buy them out. They're still independent. They either grow some of their own or contract directly with farmers. There are no brokers and they are not just depending on a piece of paper to know that the oats that they're buying or the wheat that they're buying is really organic. That's old world organics. And another company that's even more diversified is Eden Foods based in Michigan. And they do everything from canned beans to soymilk to all kinds of grocery items.

Before I made this radical shift to organic agriculture, I was a corporate agro-business executive. I started my career with International Harvester, FMC and J.I. Case, three giant machinery manufacturers. And then I got sick from pesticide poisoning so I had this rude awakening. But before I made that shift, the last job I had in the farm implement industry was I owned the dealership of my own for Case in International Harvester in Southeast Michigan. Some of my farming customers at the time were the very first (this is the early 1980s) the very first farmers in the United States to grow Vinton's food grade

soybeans for tofu and soymilk. Prior to that believe it or not, we were, even though we can perfectly grow soybeans all of the soybeans or soy products were being imported from Japan. That's not very organic to, you know, burn up all that diesel fuel getting it here. And those same farmers who were the first ones growing that were my customers buying tractors from me were selling their soybeans to Eden Foods. And talking to their CEO, Michael Potter some of those same families now from next generation are still growing under contract from Eden. He (the CEO of Eden Foods) can sit down at the dining room table, the kitchen table with these farm families and sign the contracts look them all on the eye. Again that's really old world. Most of the other soy beans and for that matter in my pantry, I have, last night I had Eden Foods garbanzo beans in an Indian dish. Most of the black beans and dry beans in this country come from China with the organic label on there. So Eden Foods was a little radical, you know their beans are just a little bit more expensive but they come either from Michigan or Southern Ontario pretty close to their plant in Michigan. I think some varieties might come from the Dakotas but they're all grown in North America by family farmers here that quite frankly Mark Kastel just trusts those farmers.

And what's coming from China? I don't know because there's a history of endemic commercial fraud in China; intellectual property; name brand property and their domestic press. There have been documented problems with organics. We don't really think the USDA is doing a top notch job of overseeing this so we think people should look for products that are made in the USA and get as close to the farmers they can. The farmer's market is a great venue for that.

**Host:** I wanna retrace a few of the threads that you encountered while you were speaking there. One of them was your personal conversion. I think it involved the pesticide poisoning that you got. How key was that for you in changing your worldview and how widespread of an issue is it? Is this something that really happens widely? Cause I certainly haven't heard about it. I heard people having issues with e.coli eating some food or tofu or sprouts or something, but pesticide poisoning, I don't know.

**Mark Kastel:** My case was occupational exposure. Sadly farmers have some highest cancer rates depending on type of cancer in our society and really high rates of other endemic problems or chronic health disease. I can say it's very common for farmers. You know, that's the evidence, their health impacts. And I can tell you as I interview farmers it's very common, I'll give you two examples, Ray Hass who was one of the founders of the Organic Valley co-op which is mostly dairy products, he was one of the first seven dairy farmers. Ray was a fairly mild mannered individual and his farm is gorgeous; he had no weeds, He's a really talented practitioner and he was organic before there was any premium market. And when I asked him why he switched to organics, he said that, I believe that, one of his family members got sick from pesticide exposure. And he came in that day at lunch and pounded his fist on the table and told his wife, "God damn it. We're gonna stop farming with chemicals or we're just gonna stop farming." And this is a man who was born in the farm. He wasn't gonna quit. He ended up educating himself in becoming a master.

Another story I can recall is someone who's very dear to me, Bill Welsh, who was a pioneering organic livestock producer. And when he died, he held an emeritus position on Cornucopia's board of directors. Bill was on the first national organic standard board after congress entrusted the USDA to oversee organics. Bill's story was a little bit different. His cattle got sick and started dying and his entire herd went into crisis. And they could not figure out what was going on and it was emotionally devastating. It ends up that he had fed the cattle some hay that was in a storage barn that was sitting on top of an empty bag that came with an insecticide. And so it was a minute trace dusting of this material that got on the feed for these cattle, and only one cow really ingested very much of it. And when Bill studied what the chemical compound was, he found out that it was one of the poisons that he studied in biological warfare school during the Korean war. And he swore that he would never, ever have that on his farm again. So Bill was someone again who educated himself when there wasn't much of an infrastructure.

Now we have a lot of research and support groups for organics not as much as we deserve. So my story in getting sick is not too unique. I was very lucky to have been seen and treated by, at the time, the country's pre-eminent environmental allergist. This is an MD, who was branded a quack in the 50s when he first suggested that environmental factors could be deleterious to health. By the time I saw him when he was 80, he's now passed away, his name was Herring Randolph. By the time I saw him, he's footnoted in all the medical literature as being the expert. He had suggested that in addition to being on a drug therapy, (because I had a fungal overgrowth) and radically changing my diet in terms of getting rid of the allergens that were in my diet. He said, "You should eat all organic food. Because the quality of our food and water are really the only control we have over the stresses of our immune system." And I began to eat entirely organic food and garden organically and did farming organically. It became really philosophically impossible to sell 400 horsepower tractors and chemical sprayers to mono crop producers when I wouldn't eat their food and, you know, years before this and I still believe that farming is a very high calling. It's stewarding the earth and God's creation. What more important occupation to the well being of our society than farming in growing our food. So I still have personally great reverence for in respect for farmers. But our entire production system is going down these two paths. Farmers have become victim themselves. So I really was excited and continue to be excited about being on the path that respects the environmental sovereignty of our planet and respects the health and well being of the people eating the food. It's an important job for all of us and our capitalistic market has turned food in just another widget. And this growth in organics is a reversal in the way many people view food.

**Host:** You're listening to Spirit in Action I'm your host Mark Helpsmeet. This is Northern Spirit Radio production on the web at [northernspiritradio.org](http://northernspiritradio.org). You can go there find stations where were broadcast. You can listen to and download our 7 ½ years of history of talking to people who are changing the world, making it a better place. You can find links to them like to the Cornucopia Institute. That's Cornucopia. You can follow the link from [northernspiritradio.org](http://northernspiritradio.org) to find them.

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Cornucopia is c-o-r-n-u-c-o-p-i-a. Or again, follow the link on [northernspiritradio.org](http://northernspiritradio.org). Mark Kastel is co-director, he's a co-founder and he's senior farm policy analyst from the Cornucopia Institute.

Now you've just been talking, Mark, about farmers in the position, the predicament I think that they find themselves in. There's a whole history to this. When you mentioned the poisons that are found in insecticides and fertilizers, it's significant to know that part of this was shifting wartime production, nitrates and so on into fertilizers. And so it was really- We had the spare war product that we needed to turn into something valuable and so they made it into stuff that we put in our crop lines. Why has this, what we think now is normal or commercial agriculture- Why is that such a powerful movement? Is it not because that's the green revolution and that's the way we feed more people? Was it a useful transition or is it not? Or is it, on the whole, could we have done just as well if we stayed organic all along?

**Mark Kastel:** Well, that's a good question. We don't know because that - Where all the research and development money went into was to products that you can patent and you can make lots of money if you're in petro-chemical business creating fertilizers. You can make lots of money if you're in the chemical warfare business. If you could take some of these neurotoxins and other compounds and instead of killing people in the battlefield you use smaller quantities and use them to kill little critters out in our farm fields and of course the sad part is that we don't just kill what were for just target species we really decimate the biology the biodiversity of wide swaths of our planet and nation by killing all kinds of species, target and non-target species. And then of course unfortunately it gets in the water and eventually kills us too, it just happens a little bit slower in most cases.

So I should add a little side bar here that one of the things I like to say and a lot of people feel good about this is: You know, if we don't accomplish anything more by switching into an organic diet, forget about the health impacts on ourselves; forget about the impacts on the environment, we're really protecting the people who grow our food. As I've said, farmers and farm workers so that generally the migrant laborers and usually they're from Mexico or Central America. They and their families, their children who very typically live in contiguous spaces to the farm fields have these high levels of cancers, of chronic diseases like asthma in children. So if we don't accomplish anything more, we're saying that it's worth protecting these people that grow our foods. So there are all kinds of ancillary benefits to organics other than when people first say, "I don't want pesticide residues on my food; I don't want antibiotic residues or synthetic hormones or genetic

engineering.” You know that might be what drives them to start with. But I think they find more meaning in their food. They learn more. The more they become interested in organics, the more they learn about their food production and the more they feel comfortable and spiritually renewed by having that level of consciousness.

**Host:** Let’s follow couple of the other threads of the things you were talking about. We just addressed what was called the green revolution and how ironic of the name is that. If there’s something it’s not green, it’s the way that we commercially have learned to produce our food on our farms.

**Mark Kastel:** I’ll tell you what is green. And that’s the greenbacks that went into the pockets of corporate executives and investors by basically turning food production into a proprietary commercial enterprise. So we’ve had a tremendous consolidation. Just a few companies control basically all the beef processing in this country. If you look at any commodity, Dean Foods controls a vast disproportionate percentage of organic and conventional malt production in this country.

So whenever we have, in the commercial sector, just a few entities controlling the production, everyone loses. And you know, the producers, the farmers, the farm workers, the consumer, we lose economically, we lose, in terms of, I would testify the quality and safety of our food, but somebody’s getting rich. There’s a green here, Mark.

**Host:** I was kind of surprised when you were listing off the various food companies that I guess you’d say were good; they are more local are not owned by the mega giant agri-business folks. One of them you did not mention was Organic Valley. Are they owned by some of the higher up, I guess not green producers, or are they still a co-op that’s really dealing with local family farmers?

**Mark Kastel:** It’s a more nuanced answer. It’s a little bit of a mixed bag. We have a lot of respect for Organic Valley. It’s a farmer-owned co-op that again started with 7 dairy farmers and a couple dozen vegetable farmers and I, in fact, was an Organic Valley farmer member at one point. It’s now about grown to just about 1,700 farmers and all over the country. And their positioned to do a billion dollars worth of business possibly as soon as next year and so it’s mostly good.

That’s a mostly really good co-op and they get almost all of their products from family scale farmers but, although I have quite a bit of personal affection for the co-op I have to do my job as a watchdog in Cornucopia as to fulfill their mission to oversee them like everyone else. And they’ve made a few mistakes along the way. They’re still making a few mistakes and we’re trying to pressure them to maintain the integrity of their label.

We have a secret weapon on that regard. Unlike Dean Foods whose board of directors has zero farmers on their board and they all make an excess of I think \$250,000 a year, the board at Organic Valley is all farmers. And when they fall off the wagon and done something that their customers don’t know about and think might not be in accordance to the spirit of the organic regulations, not maybe even the letter of the law, our secret



weapon is we can go to the farmers. And they really care. And the worst problems we've uncovered over there, they have really been upset by them and they've called their management to task and corrected the problems. So it's a shame that we've had to get that far but that's the strength of Organic Valley. When others criticize Organic Valley, I like to defend them by quoting Winston Churchill who once said, "Democracy is the worst possible form of government, excepting all the rest."

And so Organic Valley isn't perfect but it's certainly a pretty darn good outfit worth saving for the farmers and the consumers who are stake holders there. And who are in that camp. We think it's a good outfit that's worth making sure it doesn't betray the values that that co-op is founded upon.

**Host:** One of the things about Organic Valley that I note is that I think it originated here in Wisconsin. And Cornucopia originates again from Wisconsin even though you've spread out across the country, both of them have. Is there something special brewing here? I guess that's a pun in itself. Is there something special brewing in Wisconsin with respect to organics?

**Mark Kastel:** I think there probably is. We have, I think we have the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> largest number of organic farms in the country. We certainly have the largest number of organic dairy farms, and livestock farms, and egg farms. I think it's a combination of factors. One is that the topography here in parts of Wisconsin really, is not conducive for large industrial scale agriculture. So we retained our small farms much longer than some other states did. And these were small kinda hardscrabble farms, hard working people. Most organic farmers in this country were not kind of hippie backed in land folks although they are out there. Organics is really a big tent. I like to look at the membership at Cornucopia, which is now around 7,000 and its thought to have more organic farmers than any other group in the country as members. And we have those bare-foot hippies farming with horses. But we also have a lot of Amish family farming with horses as Cornucopia members and other plain sect like Mennonite folks and lots of conservative rural Christians. If you drove by their farms in most cases you couldn't really tell in Wisconsin whether it's an organic farm or a conventional farm. They look very similar. The cows get to actually go outside and graze on organic farms and that's one tell tale sign if it's a dairy outfit.

So I think it's a combination of, we had farm families that were really very close to being organic to start with many of them. And scaled properly and in the right mindset and economically who are looking for a really good alternative. And the other part is that in many parts of Wisconsin and the upper mid-west, these areas were settled by European and Scandinavian immigrants and there was a history of a more socialistic economic structure of doing things together. And so the Scandinavians, the Swedes, the Norwegians and the Fins, they came to Wisconsin and Minnesota, the Dakotas and they formed co-operatives; they formed businesses that they owned together and I'm really lucky that where I live in Wisconsin my phone company is a co-operative owned by us, the user members, my electric company is a co-operative; I buy my food at one of two natural food co-ops that are member owned; my LP Gas where heating comes from the

farm supply co-op; my bank is a co-operative credit union. So these are things we do together. We're involved in capitalism, we're involved in commerce but we're sharing risk and we share reward and so I think that kind of economic perspective of doing things together was really conducive as a launching pad for organics also because we couldn't depend on the land grant universities and the co-operative extension service for knowledge. We needed to teach ourselves; we needed to co-operate among ourselves as a farmer-to-farmer system. And that's still true and the largest organic farming conference in the country sponsored by Moses and La Cross, Wisconsin is coming up here at the end of February-it takes place in February each year so it's not a surprise that the largest conference of that type in the country is right on the Mississippi River pretty close to Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin all meet.

**Host:** You know it's funny, Mark when you mentioned electric and telephone co-op all those things, I live a few hours away from you up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. You're down in the Southwest corner of the state. I have all of those same things. So yeah it's true. It's kind of omnipresent here perhaps in the upper mid-west. And I think it's a spiritual outlook, too. And one of the things I want to pursue as a thread, there is I think a perception in mainstream society that you can either be spiritual or you can be scientific and that conventional (using pesticides, all that kind of thing) that kind of agriculture is scientific because they're controlling the number of bushels they produce per acre and they've quantified all these things and so that's scientific. Versus maybe of more holistic or spiritual outlook which is probably what people think about organics as being where the quality of the process and the quality of the experience of eating the food or producing it matters.

Do you find that you have to address that difference in perception from the public's point of view?

**Mark Kastel:** Well, that's an interesting question. First of all, I take issue a little bit in terms of the scientific basis for conventional agriculture. I think a lot of it is the commercial basis and a lot of these materials that are sold are based on enriching the companies. There's not a lot of evidence that genetic engineering is an example that really economically benefits farmers. In some cases it produces lower yields. But it's jacked up the price of feed, and herbicide, and fertilizers without a lot of reward to the individuals or certainly to society. The other thing is, you know there's the old saying that, I can't remember exactly how it goes, "Man plans and God executes." And there's also a saying that "Mother nature bats last."

And so a lot of these innovations that in the short term, in a little blip, in terms of evolution look like they're productive, really aren't. The genetically engineered cult of ours- Most of our corn or soybeans in this country are sold by Monsanto's technology (genetic engineering) to resist glyphosate, the active ingredient in Round Up. They're the largest herbicide manufacturer (Monsanto). And so for a few years that worked great but now we're seeing resistance in the weeds just like organisms create resistance to antibiotic usage if it's overdone. Now we see weeds that the chemical won't kill. So we're having higher applications of chemicals or a toxic cocktail of different herbicides

to kill the weeds. Some of the insects are becoming resistant to the genetic engineered traits or the chemicals that are being used so this type of technology has a very short shelf life that in terms of the evolutionary process in this planet. Now this is a little blip and we're now finding that many conditions around the world especially in developing countries that organic production done right is even more productive than some of the high technology agriculture. So we're getting a different kind of reality kicking in.

Maybe I can go off on a little tangent with you here, Mark because you talked about the consumer's perspective in terms of spirituality. I can go farther than that and say that in every religious vernacular we use to say grace before we ate and we meant it. We were thankful for our food. It's just a few generations in this species that at least in rich countries that we've been relatively food secure. That's not true with everybody we share this planet with. Prior to that, if it didn't rain at the right time, if it didn't get dew at the right time your children literally starved to death. So when we said grace before and after meals in many cases we really meant it. And that's where I think the spiritual component is coming back for so many families that they're finding this intimate relationship with the earth and God's creation through their food production. Many people are going back to home gardening and canning; being a member of a CSA and a food co-op where these are communities around food. This is this wonderful experiential opportunity for children.

I travel all over the country speaking and many times I'm in a conference and one of our local members will invite me over for a meal. I love this phrase; I've heard it more than once. They serve a wonderful meal. I might be in downtown Seattle, and they say all these vegetables came from "Our Farm".

And what they're saying is they're a member of the CSA. They actually look at that as being their farm. They have this emotional investment in it. And it's just the- I think a wonderful trend that people are doing more prayers, being more conscious, there are people who are vegetarians and vegans who are obviously very conscious of impact of livestock agriculture on our psyche and on the animals. But I think there's a growing trend of conscious omnivores who are saying that: "I will not with my patronage support these torturous conditions and disrespectful conditions that animals raised as our food have to endure. I'm just gonna opt out."

And there's a lot of people who are really, really interested in not only the quality of meat and milk, and dairy products and eggs for their nutrition and their safety and the impact on their family, but also how are those animals cared for and so all of this added awareness is something that is really pleasing to me. I've seen this industry grow from just a little bunch of farmers directly selling food to today where organics is an over 30 billion dollar industry and it's because people care for great measure.

**Host:** I find it interesting that you mentioned omnivores who are eating, I guess, healthy meat that you consider the entire trajectory. I think part of the global tide that has helped support this move towards our organic foods has been some thinking, like the thinking in Michael Pollan's *Omnivores Dilemma*. And also back further than that, Wendell Berry's

*A Sense Of Place*, the idea that we actually connect to our food and to the place it comes from and the entire process in my lexicon that is a spiritual question. If all we care about is how many pounds of it then we've lost perhaps spirituality on that. So are there other major I guess cultural tides that have been adding to this movement that the Cornucopia Institute and you, Mark Kastel as part of the co-directors for that institute that have helped raise up the visibility of the work that you're doing?

**Mark Kastel:** Well, I think, you know we've talked about the spiritual heart connection here, certainly if you consider yourself as an environmentalist and that Wendell Berry is a theologian if we wanna call him that, it certainly called attention to relationship between how we eat and how we steward this planet. And so, I think there's a lot of drivers that are bringing people to the good food movement and health is certainly as I was saying the key driver but not the only driver. So protecting the earth, we have a self interest we're one of the creatures that walk upon it and if we want to protect ourselves and our children and following generations we cannot keep continuing to soil our bed with these toxins and so I really say, at Cornucopia we operate at a busy intersection. It's where health intersects with humane animal health; where fairness and economic justice, where our food system intersects in protecting the environment, so it's a busy, busy intersection and a lot of people get it.

A lot of people come to organics and the good food movement for different reasons but we're all meeting at the same place. The happy part is just growing exponentially. The numbers of farmer's markets around the country, the number of CSA's, the overall gross volume in organic sales. These are booming. New food co-ops are forming around the country as the premier portal for how to find organic food in your community. It's a very positive outcome that's why it's worth- We view this as an industry watch dog. It's worth protecting because unfortunately as we grow, were dangling these economic carrots in front of people that are only interested in the economic rewards. We think organics should be scale neutral. We welcome investor-owned corporations but they have to play by the same rules.

**Host:** Well, it's good that you're doing that work. Can we address some of the specifics of what Cornucopia does? The Cornucopia Institute again on the web at [cornucopia.org](http://cornucopia.org) or you can follow the link from here [northernspiritradio.org](http://northernspiritradio.org).

What about the scorecard, the reports, your membership? Could you flesh out a little bit about what Cornucopia is in reality?

**Mark Kastel:** Well, we're a public interest charity. We're tax exempt so we're chartered by the IRS to do research and educational work and we've not always been successful in the political arena but we're very active there. The National Organics Standards Board created by congress to oversee the organic regulations and advise the USDA secretary. As an example: Nothing synthetic can be used in organics unless they bless it first and make sure that it's not a threat to the environment, not a threat to human health. The most benign example is, we can't have an organic cupcake without baking powder. And there's no organic version of baking powder. I don't know if there's any research that

suggests a threat to human health. So we're at those meetings twice a year but this system has been undermined and corrupted by economic powers in Washington and partisan politics. It was a real sell out during the Bush years. They actually proactively tried to monkey-wrench the system. Many of us were more optimistic when Mr. Obama was elected and now are quite disillusioned by the fact that the same kind of corrupt Washington power politics are being played out. And the stewardship of the organic program at the USDA.

Pres. Obama hired a former Iowa governor, Tom Vilsack, the bio-technology industry governor of the year, to run the USDA and it has been more balanced. There's been more support and funding for farmers markets and some nutrition programs and efforts to get better food in our schools and that's really good. And better budgets at the national organic program.

But they've done things like appointed corporate shills to help oversee organic regulations and so we're kinda going backwards in some enforcement areas and we're really just about ready to take them to court on some of these issues where we think they're actually violating the law.

So we actively work on the political arena and get our hands a little dirty there. But we think that there's a higher power in this country than the USDA when it comes to overseeing organics. And that's the organic consumer, our customers out there in the farming community. They really care; they have a passion for this.

So when we find that there are improprieties in a given sector of organics, we want to empower consumers and wholesale buyers so they can make good, discerning purchasing decisions.

So imagine our score cards. We have a, we started with a score card for organic dairy; which brands come from family scale farmers who's cow might have names, not numbers. Which brands come from entirely or partially from giant "factory farms", industrial scale agriculture where the cows might live very short lives before they're slaughtered for hamburger just like conventional dairies pushed for very high production. They get sick, they can't reproduce anymore. That's not what we think we're paying our premiums for. And so that score card- There's a narrative report for anyone who wants to dig deeper on knowing about their organic dairy products.

And then there's a brand scorecard with over a hundred brands of milk and cheese and ice cream and really helping us guide us in the supermarket and in the co-op. And that was so popular we now replicated that, rating all the organic egg brands in the country for our vegan and vegetarian members there's score cards for organic soy products, and soy tofu, soy milk and some of the meat analogs.

So we've really dug deep to try to say that we want the very best in organics and we'll all team up together to create marketplace pressure to reward the true heroes in this industry and send a really powerful message to the bad actors. If you want our loyalty and our

patronage then you have to abide by the values that this industry was founded upon.

**Host:** And also in the cornucopia.org website you have a menu option for reports. Who prepares these? Who are you working with? What kind of expertise do they bring to it? I noticed by the way you have a menu option for almonds. How did almonds get their own menu option?

**Mark Kastel:** Sure, well first, these are all produced in house. We have outside reviewers; experts and scientists that take a look at our material. We have a pretty diverse background and range of talents here. My background is in agricultural policy and agroeconomics. We have staff in our policy area that has academic advanced degrees and doctorates in food science, food policy, soil science, vegetable production and when we don't have the in the house talent we try to collaborate with others.

So your interesting question about almonds, we discovered a rather stealthy federal regulation that went into effect a few years ago that required all "raw" almonds should be "pasteurized". What does that mean?

Well, there were a couple salmonella problems with almonds, with raw almonds. They could only trace one back. There is a company called, I think, it's Paramount Farms. They had 9,000 acres. I think it was the largest nut, almond and pistachio grower in the world. They might not be able to control the pathogens on their nuts the same way somebody with 50 or 100 acres doing in a hand crafted organic basis might.

And so because they can't control it they've mandated now, the USDA, that all "raw" almonds be either heated with steam and treated with a chemical fumigant called propylene oxide. That's a chemical banned in Canada and many other countries and classified as, I believe a possible carcinogen. We don't want that in our food. So we kinda rang the alarm bell on this and we've actually sued the USDA.

The USDA doesn't really have the regulatory authority over food safety. That's the FDA. And so they made this rule through something called The Almond Board of California (ABC) which is a research and promotion board; those are the people who trying to sell you almonds. They don't really have the legal authority to regulate food safety and so we're still in court. This is really, really an important issue for may Cornucopia members who are vegan. So about the vast majority of our membership are organic farmers. At least 30%, last time we checked, what we call urban allies. Some of these people don't eat meat and one of their prime protein sources is almonds. They make their own almond milk, they make almond flours, and they don't want propylene oxide and they want the beneficial aspects of eating raw food that has not been heated and denatured. And so this is something near and dear to them and it's a symptom of industry manipulating our food to make it convenient to be produced in an industrial scale.

**Host:** It's clear to me, Mark that you have a spiritual connection both to food and to what you're doing. Does this come out of a religious history or maybe a reaction to a religious background that you have? What is your background?

**Mark Kastel:** I don't think it comes out of a religious background. I don't see a lot of spiritual connection with food today directly coming out of religious teachings and religious institutions and I certainly did not have that strong guidance in my own home. I think people are finding that and reconnecting and then connecting using that as a vehicle to connect to their various religious pathways so I sadly don't see that. I mean I've seen some evidence in Catholic and Jewish roots and teachings and some institutions but none of them are mainstream catholic or mainstream Judaism. They're kind of the upstarts trying to look deeper in finding more meaning in their own spiritual lives.

**Host:** Well, it's a good thing we've got the Cornucopia Institute and you, Mark Kastel keeping your ears open and your eyes open for the surreptitious ways in which organics are compromised in this country; in their deep essence and even in sometimes as you just mentioned with almonds on the very obvious scientific level. The standards are getting compromised and we need a watchdog like the Cornucopia Institute out there watching for us. I'm amazed at the depth and the breath of the work of the Cornucopia Institute is doing. I do hope people will check out your website, [cornucopia.org](http://cornucopia.org). And I wanna thank you so much, Mark Kastel for joining me here today for spirit in action.

**Mark Kastel:** It's been a pleasure. I've enjoyed hearing your show on my own local public community radio station WDRT in Viroqua, Wisconsin.

**Host:** And I send a shout out to WDRT listeners and to all of the community radio stations, where this is carried. Or if you're listening via the internet, all of these places are good sources of information. Support your local community radio station. And support the Cornucopian Institute, too. Thanks again, Mark.

**Mark Kastel:** You bet.

**Host:** The theme music for this program is *Turning Up The World* performed by Sarah Thompson. This spirit in action program is an effort of Northern Spirit Radio. You can listen to our programs and find links and information about us and our guests on our website, [northernspiritradio.org](http://northernspiritradio.org). Thank you for listening. I'm your host, Mark Helpsmeet and I welcome your comments and stories of those living lives of spiritual fruit. May you find deep roots to support you and grow steadily toward the light. This is Spirit in Action.