

# Is Organic Shampoo Chemistry or Botany?

By JOHN LELAND

**T**HE other night I served an organic pasta sauce and washed my face with an organic cleanser. The sauce was made from tomatoes and other farm ingredients, all certified organic under strict federal guidelines. The facial cleanser featured a handful of synthetic and chemical ingredients, including some that ecological activists have questioned as possibly harmful to users or the environment.

Both products came from the same store and promised the same organic quality. But in each case the word organic described a different set of standards.

When it comes to soaps and shampoos, “almost every product out there labeled organic isn’t,” said Ronnie Cummins, executive director of the Organic Consumers Association. At meetings of organic manufacturers and federal regulators in Austin, Tex., last week, the consumer group complained that companies are exploiting the term organic to sell products little different from any others — and with little oversight from the government.

The United States Department of Agriculture, which regulates organic food labeling, has neither standards nor the authority to regulate labels on personal care products.

The cleanser I used, selected at a local health food store, is made by Avalon Natural Products. Its components are used in a range of shampoos, conditioners, scrubs, lotions and lip balms labeled as organic by numerous manufacturers.

Twenty years ago, an organic label might have been of interest to a few health purists. But as organic foods have moved from farm stands to major supermarkets, the term “organic” has come to represent not a set of farming guidelines but a lifestyle, accessorized with everything from unbleached cotton sheets to hemp clothing, to beauty and body-care products.

“These things are coming into supermarkets on the back of organic foods,” said Peggy Northrop, editor in chief of Organic Style magazine, which comes off as Vogue for vegetarians. For young women, she added, “organic doesn’t mean food, it means an attitude toward your life.”

The promise of organic, in foods or body lotions, is that natural ingredients, minimally processed, are healthier for people and better for the ecosystem than conventional products. Though this logic doesn’t always hold up, consumers are willing to pay more for products bearing an organic label.

When the Agriculture Department issued the first standards for labeling organic foods last October, after more than a decade of wrangling, it closed a loophole in the food industry, putting strict limits on how manufacturers and stores could use the label organic. An organic label on one company’s food products meant the same as on another’s.

But for cosmetics and personal care products, consumer advocates say, “organic” means whatever manufacturers say it does. Products made using petroleum-derived and other synthetic or chemical ingredients, prohibited in organic foods, can be found among the organic shampoos and lotions made by Avalon, Nature’s Gate, Jason Natural Cosmetics, Kiss My Face and

## GREEN APPEAL

Despite their leafy labels, many personal care products bearing the word organic contain ingredients that do not exist in nature. The federal guidelines that regulate organic food labeling do not apply to hair and skin-care products.



Illustration by Marivi Pulido-Brown; photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times (foreground) and Premium Stock/Corbis

other brands, said Urvashi Rangan, an environmental health scientist.

On a recent evening at Whole Foods Market in Manhattan, Dr. Rangan, who runs Eco-Labels.org at Consumers Union, the company that publishes Consumer Reports, examined the labels in an aisle of shampoos and conditioners. She shook her head.

“Even with a Ph.D. in toxicology, I can’t tell whether these are any different from what you’d find in a drug store,” she said. Dr. Rangan did not think the products posed big health risks. But reading a list of ingredients — “Zinc gluconate, methyl propyl paraben, olefin sulfonate, DEA, steareth-2” — she added, “You have to ask yourself, What are these doing in a product that’s called organic?”

Allyn Jones, who runs the Whole Body division of Whole Foods Markets, said the company carefully chooses only products with no petroleum-based colors or oils, and avoids brands “that were just using organic as a marketing gimmick.” She added that since personal care products are mostly water and may be stored for long periods, they need preservatives not found in organic foods. Even so, she said, “it’s really confusing for consumers.” Standards that apply on one side of the store do not apply on the other, Mrs. Jones said.

## Hair and skin can absorb toxins quite efficiently.

Because the word organic is used to mean different things, it is difficult to tally the sales of products using the name. The Natural Marketing Institute, which analyzes the sales of products positioned as natural, estimated that personal care products for this broader group accounted for \$2.8 billion last year.

Most people don’t monitor their hair products as vigorously as they do their pasta sauce, of course, for the obvious reason that they don’t eat their styling gel. But the skin, scalp and hair are remarkably efficient at absorbing toxins and carcinogens. A group of researchers at Stanford University in 1999 found they could deliver a DNA vaccine to laboratory mice as effectively by rubbing it on their skin as injecting it into muscle.

In fact, some toxins can do more harm absorbed through the skin than through the digestive system because they lodge directly in fat cells, bypassing the liver, said Dr. Rangan.

Dr. Samuel S. Epstein, an emeritus professor of environmental and occupational

medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health and chairman of the Cancer Prevention Coalition, has led some of the most aggressive campaigns against toxins in personal care products. Even natural-sounding ingredients, he said, might break down to form carcinogens, or be contaminated by pesticides.

But surveying the ingredients of a dozen personal care products labeled organic, Dr. Epstein saw few reasons for alarm. “Good Lord, these are lower in carcinogens than the average bottle,” he said.

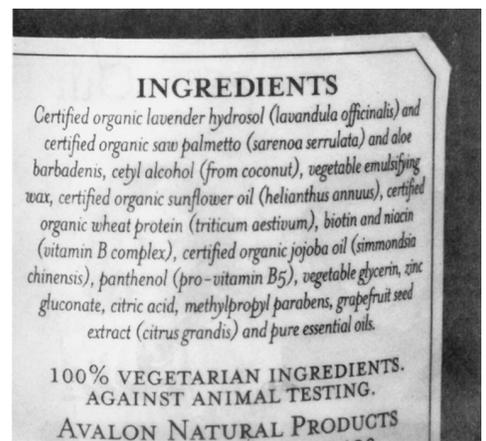
Even so, such products fall short of the promises implied by the label organic, said Diana Kaye, a partner in Terressentials, a small Maryland-based company that makes shampoos and lotions without artificial ingredients or processes. Ms. Kaye, a former architect, started the company after chemotherapy treatments for cancer left her sensitive to the chemicals in many products, even those labeled organic. Such products merit careful scrutiny, she said, because people use them daily over long periods of time.

The organic industry has formed a task force to develop voluntary guidelines for cosmetics and personal care products, said Katherine DiMatteo, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, which represents many of the major manufacturers. “We feel we should protect the integrity of the organic claim,” she said. “It’s quite an unregulated business.” Past attempts to get manufacturers to agree on standards had broken down, she said.

As first steps toward voluntary standards, Ms. DiMatteo cited broad consensus about banning petrochemicals, genetically modified crops, irradiated ingredients and certain synthetics or chemicals that are prohibited in organic foods.

Manufacturers are divided, however, on what to do about water. Under the guidelines for organic food, products labeled “certified organic” must include at least 95 percent certified organic ingredients; those with at least 70 percent organic ingredients may be labeled as “containing organic ingredients.” Food manufacturers cannot count water toward these percentages. The main ingredient in many personal care products is water — with a little herbal extract dissolved in it, like a tea -- and manufacturers often count the weight of water in their organic claims.

This herbal “tea” is sometimes listed on labels as hydrosol, and refers to water that has been used to extract essential oils for other use. A shampoo calling itself 80 percent organic may be 80 percent water or



**FINE PRINT** The back label of an Avalon Natural Products hair conditioner that claims to be 70 percent organic. A consumer group says the chief ingredient, a hydrosol, mainly water, is used to inflate the organic content.

hydrosol, with a hint of rosemary or other herb throughout. The remaining 20 percent of the bottle may contain synthetic detergents and preservatives.

California, the first state to pass its own guidelines for organic personal care products, allows manufacturers to include hydrosols in their percentages of organic ingredients. Earlier this month, the Organic Consumers Association lodged a complaint with state agencies in California, singling out Avalon Natural Products for claiming that hydrosols were organic, which the association said was deceptive.

Mr. Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association said this practice allows products with very small traces of organic oils or herbs to be labeled organic. “We’re afraid of the degradation of the entire organic label,” he said.

Emma Mann, the brand manager for Avalon’s organic line, said the company’s use of hydrosols, as well as synthetic detergents and preservatives, complied with California law. “We’d like to see those synthetics replaced by organic ingredients,” she said, but she added that such replacements were not available.

Along with Consumers Union, Mr. Cummins’s group called for manufacturers and government agencies to hold open meetings on standards, inviting the public to watch and comment. “If it gets out there that we’ve got this multibillion-dollar industry that’s a hoax,” he said, “it’s going to undermine people’s support across the board.”

As for my own experience, the organic cleanser was gentle and nonirritating, but left my skin dryer than my usual synthetic soap. The pasta sauce was from Muir Glen. To my taste it needed salt.