
Final project report submitted to the Organic Farming Research Foundation:

Project Title:

**Farm Made: A Guide to
On-Farm Processing for Organic Producers**

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Project Summary: Our project focused on developing a farmer-friendly guide to on-farm organic processing. The guide would serve as a tool for organic producers to capture more profit from their enterprises and thus improve farm viability. The resulting 44-page guide entitled *Farm Made: A Guide to On-Farm Processing for Organic Producers*, addresses the general requirements for developing an organic processing enterprise on-farm. It also features four example enterprises—sorghum syrup; packaged fresh salad greens; jams, jellies & spreads; and table eggs. In each of these examples, the basic requirements for production and processing are addressed and followed with the specific requirements needed to make the enterprise certified organic. Extensive resources are provided.

Introduction: Growth in the organic marketplace has brought about many new opportunities for organic producers. The blessings, however, have been mixed. As it has matured, the organic marketplace has developed characteristics associated with the conventional marketplace. These include a decline in market premiums for many products, and the challenge of keeping organic production profitable for small- and mid-sized farms. One coping strategy that is finding interest in the conventional community is value-added, on-farm processing. There is every reason to expect this strategy to work as well, or even better, for organic producers.

There are two obvious barriers organic producers face when they consider on-farm processing. The first is psychological. On-farm processing can appear intimidating and beyond reach, on one hand; on the other, it may seem unnecessary to someone who is already “adding value” by raising crops or livestock organically. The second barrier—a more pragmatic one—is the lack of good, producer-friendly information on small-scale organic processing and handling. It is this barrier we chose to address with our project.

We—the authors—have long been aware of the dearth of information on organic on-farm handling. All three of us have worked as specialists on the ATTRA Project—the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, which is operated by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). Our circumstances and responsibilities with that project brought us into regular contact with organic producers from across the country, many of whom were trying to grow value-added enterprises on their farms and ranches. As we searched for information to help these clients, the lack of good information in the public domain became obvious. In some instances, general information on the topic was limited; in *all* cases, organic information was lacking.

Well-capitalized farms and businesses can, of course, purchase expertise in the form of consultants. Resource-challenged producers on small- and family-sized farms cannot always find, much less afford private consultants. We believe that low-cost sources of technical information on organic processing help to create a more-level playing field and give the smaller operators a chance to create a profitable enterprise.

Objectives: The basic goal of our project, then, was to promote value-added strategies to increase the competitive advantage of small- and mid-sized organic farms and thus, their economic survivability. Our specific objective was to begin filling the gap in information on organic on-farm processing. We would do this by developing an introductory guide to small-scale organic processing, featuring four frequently-asked-about enterprises .

Materials & Methods: Our methodology for creating the guide essentially consisted of three interrelated steps: enterprise selection, information gathering & synthesis, editing & production.

Enterprise Selection

In our proposal, we promised that the guide would provide general information on organic on-farm processing and also detail four enterprises. We retained the option to address more enterprises if time and resources allowed. Unfortunately, they did not, and we confined ourselves to four, only. We originally chose to cover sorghum syrup, packaged fresh salad greens, fruit spreads, and honey as our four example enterprises. Unfortunately, neither of the two stakeholders we had expected to use for guidance in honey production and processing was able to assist us once the project got underway. We therefore chose to replace the honey enterprise with table eggs. Like the original four enterprises we chose, egg packaging was an enterprise organic producers had frequently enquired about through ATTRA. We were also able to tap the expertise of Anne Fanatico—also a former ATTRA specialist—who is a nationally recognized expert in alternative poultry systems and a trained organic inspector. She became the third author of the guide.

Information Gathering & Synthesis

As detailed in our original proposal, information gathering proceeded on four main fronts:

- Guidance from organic producers and handlers familiar with the focus enterprises. The main sources here were our small pool of stakeholders.
- Contact with University-based professionals. Of particular help were the staff at Oklahoma State University's Food & Agricultural Products Center (FAPC), who provided a clear picture of food safety concerns, labeling issues and the host of regulatory matters that need to be addressed by *all* processors—including the organic ones. They also generously provided a review of the document to ensure completeness and correct interpretations of technical matters and regulatory requirements.
- Contact with regulatory agencies. Thanks to FAPC's assistance, minimal additional contacts with State and Federal agencies were necessary to ensure accuracy. Most of the additional requirements to be studied related to compliance with the National Organic Standard. That information was readily forthcoming from the National Organic Program (NOP) Web site and from certifiers.
- Literature search. As indicated, concise information on organic processing for small-farms was and is limited. However, assembling the needed elements from diverse sources was certainly doable. Effective synthesis of that information was the main challenge. That was handled by a primary author for each section, with further reviews by one of the other two authors. We relied on our stakeholders for additional assistance in reviewing drafts at various stages.

Editing & Production

The final draft document was edited in-house at the Kerr Center. The formatter was a professional we regularly use for all of our publications. A local vendor produced the initial run of 500 copies. The document is currently available on the Kerr Center Web site, and will soon be available on the ATTRA Web site.

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Results: The product of our effort, *Farm Made: A Guide to On-Farm Processing for Organic Producers*, is available in its entirety on the Kerr Center Web site at:
<http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/FarmMadeReport09.pdf>

Discussion: The process of researching and writing *Farm Made: A Guide to On-Farm Processing for Organic Producers* reinforced our original assertion that good, farmer-friendly, published information on farm-scale organic processing is lacking, and the organic community would benefit greatly if more such information were available. Among the on-farm processing enterprises that organic producers have shown particular interest are grain milling, seed cleaning, wool, cheese making, and honey. As noted, honey was originally intended as a focus enterprise for this publication. It is one of the more challenging organic enterprises to address. The chief reason for this is, of course, the lack of a national standard for organic production.

Another enterprise that producers have expressed interest in is meat processing. Because of food safety issues and non-NOP regulations that limit and even preclude small-scale processing, this topic might need to be addressed in a different manner.

Outreach: Effective distribution of publications like *Farm Made...* can be challenging. Recognition of this fact had much to do with our partnership with the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). NCAT manages the ATTRA Project which has proven one of the most successful mechanisms for delivering needed information to the Sustainable and Organic communities. *Farm Made:...* will be added to the list of ATTRA publications, which will increasingly feature select publications from other organizations. Promotion of *Farm Made:...* will be accomplished via Weekly Harvest, ATTRA's e-newsletter and other means.

As mentioned, Kerr Center already features *Farm Made:...* on the Kerr Center Web site, which has about five thousand visitors per month. We have also made an initial print run of 500 copies that will be distributed free-of-charge. (There may be a small charge for copies to cover printing and postage on future printing runs.) Kerr Center will be promoting *Farm Made:...* on the home page of our Web site and through our newsletter *Field Notes*, which has a circulation approaching eight thousand and a readership of sixteen thousand.

We will also be doing a limited mailing of copies to organic organizations such as MOSES, which advise their members or readership of publications such as ours.

About the authors: George Kuepper is a former Director of the Midwest NCAT/ATTRA office in Iowa. He is currently the Sustainable Agriculture Specialist and Intern Program Coordinator at the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Poteau, Oklahoma.

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