

To avoid exploding watermelons, Chinese turn to organic farming

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In this photo taken Friday May 13, 2011, a farmer shows a watermelon that had bursted in his rented greenhouse in Danyang city in eastern China's Jiangsu province. Watermelon fields in eastern China are a mess of burst fruit after farmers abused growth chemicals in an attempt to make extra money but ended up ruining their crops, state media reported Tuesday May 17, 2011.

AP

BEIJING—Chinese farmer Liu Mingsuo never sought fame.

All he wanted was to plant seeds, tend his fields, harvest his crops and make a profit.

But Liu became a national celebrity in May when his fields of watermelons in Jiangsu province exploded like land mines after he had treated them with a growth hormone.

On China's evening news, Liu gave viewers across the country a play-by-play of the week that was.

"I used a chemical on the 6th and found the exploded watermelons on the 7th. I found more than 80 exploded watermelons in the morning," he said, "and more than 100 in the afternoon. More and more then exploded on the 8th.

"And don't mention the 10th to me," he said. "I didn't count anymore — because I couldn't bear it."

China's exploding watermelon story captured the attention of the world, unfortunately more as matter of curiosity than concern.

But for Chinese consumers who have suffered through a season of one food scandal after another it was no laughing matter. For them it was yet another warning signal that all is not well in the nation's food industry.

Even wedding banquets have proven to be potential danger zones.

In Hunan province, birthplace of legendary leader Mao Zedong, 478 guests at three different weddings this spring were rushed to hospital after being poisoned.

At one wedding alone, in Wufeng Village, 286 of 500 guests had to seek emergency health care following post-nuptial

feasts.

And the scandals weren't contained to the countryside either. In sophisticated Shanghai, news reports revealed that restaurants were cooking with used, reprocessed cooking oil — some of which had been collected from sewers.

Some experts believe that as many as one out of every 10 restaurant meals in China is prepared using reprocessed animal fat or vegetable oil.

But Zheng Rong, Liu Yujing and a group of 100 other Beijing mothers may have avoided all of these risks. They read the distant early warning signals of China's food troubles early.

And like a small but growing number of well off, urbanized Chinese, they've gone organic, creating their own food co-op known as the Mother's Green Alliance, dedicating themselves to ensuring that they and their families eat safely.

They research the community of progressive organic farms that have sprouted up north of the city and organize to have them make deliveries two days a week to the co-op's store in Beijing's Huilongguan district.

"We can't control the air quality or the environment in general," says Liu Yujing, "but this is something we believe we can control."

In doing so, they've found shelter from China's seemingly endless tsunami of food scandals and have slowly grown their number.

For Zheng Rong, "the turning point — the trigger" was China's milk poisoning scandal of 2008. That changed her view of food forever, she says.

Her son was just 2 1/2 -years-old then and news that at least six children had died and more than 300,000 others had been poisoned by milk laced with melamine left her shuddering.

An industrial compound used to produce plastics, milk producers had added melamine to their milk and infant formula to pump up protein readings — and ensure sales.

It was the first, big Chinese food scandal of the new century and represented a major crisis for the government.

To this day, many here believe that more children died and more were poisoned than officially acknowledged.

Two officials were subsequently put to death.

Yet despite announced crackdowns, jail terms and fines for perpetrators, the Chinese government seems incapable of shutting down the scandals.

In recent months for example — three years after the melamine debacle — melamine continues to be found in milk, most recently in Shanxi and Hebei provinces as well as in the mega-city of Chongqing.

Why do food scandals persist in China?

The answer is complex, says Chen Junshi, a member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering and a senior researcher at China's National Institute for Nutrition and Food Safety.

He believes China's food scandals have been "exaggerated" by a sometimes irresponsible media. Most of the reporting on so-called "food scandals" are more about food fraud, he says, and do not involve toxic substances or harm to

human health.

“These two elements must exist simultaneously to actually constitute a food safety issue,” he explains.

But he admits that overseeing the country’s massive and fragmented agricultural and food processing industry is a challenge for China.

“It would be abnormal if there weren’t food safety issues,” he says.

“Common people have higher standards about food now. Before they never saw food safety as an issue — now they’re quite aware.”

But the mothers at Green Alliance contend that the issue might really be about values in a country where an obsession about profit now seems to have taken hold.

“Some people nowadays are no longer rooted to the earth,” says Zheng, seated in her storefront space stacked with fresh vegetables awaiting pick up. “They’re more interested in maximizing profit than in food safety.”

Liu Yujing, who inspects all the farms that supply the co-op, echoes that sentiment.

“We want foods that are free of chemicals, additives and pesticides,” she says. “But we’re also looking for farmers and suppliers with a high sense of morality.”