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Where to find organic food in Mid-levels

Mid-levels residents are spoilt for choice when looking for healthy organic food, as health-conscious, environmentally aware entrepreneurs have opened various stores around the neighbourhood.



Store manager Aman Dhillon, who has been in the health food retail industry for many years

Natures Village

This long-standing establishment specialised in bodybuilding products before branching out into organic and health products. 36 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central; 2121 1637 naturesvillage.com.hk

Their Story

Aman Dhillon, the (fit-looking) store manager, says: "We were founded in 1999. We were more into sports nutrition in the past, but a few years ago the organic food trend took off and people were getting more health-conscious, so we began to diversify into organic and eco-friendly products. Our staff have to go through months of training because there's just so much to learn in this realm. Anyone who joins has to be passionate about these things."

Highlights

- Known for their large selection of vitamins, supplements and protein powders.

- Seven branches spread across Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories.
- The shop at Lyndhurst Terrace is not massive but it has more than meets the eye. You can find everything from organic protein powder to almond spread to eco-friendly washing powder.

Is it worth paying more for organic stuff?

Dhillon says: "Once there was a couple who came into our shop. The wife had just spent \$2,000 on clothes at H&M. The husband brought to our till a big bunch of health products that came to about \$1,000. The wife said: 'That's very expensive!' The husband looked at her and went: 'Honey, you've just spent \$2,000 on clothes, which I'm sure you are not going to wear again in a few months' time. And this health stuff can last much longer!' That pretty much sums things up – no offence to ladies though."

Read the logos

Foods that meet given requirements can be certified organic, but the requirements vary from country to country and generally involve certain production standards for growing, storing and processing. These are the foreign organic logos often seen in organic products imported to Hong Kong:



And this is the Hong Kong Organic Research Centre logo accredited by IFOAM (The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements).

How to be a smart organic shopper?

- "Read the label. Labels can be confusing. For example, there's this cookie bar that tells you there are 190 calories for a serving size of two. What does that mean? It means you only have to eat half of the cookie to get those calories. If you don't read the label and eat the whole thing, you end up with 380 calories."
- "Don't be fooled by things with many logos. Some brands try to fool consumers by adding more logos even when they mean nothing. Coconut oil is gluten-free naturally, but there are companies out there who put 'gluten-free' logo on their coconut oil. I find that ridiculous!"
- "Organic certification surely makes a difference. But bear in mind there are small companies whose products are practically organic, perhaps because nothing is added or modified, but they don't have the money to get certification. Having no certification doesn't make them less good."



One of the staple items at natures Village



Store manager Jessie Cheung runs the organic shop with passion

Organic Oasis

This organic food store with an emphasis on skin health has a mission to help busy urban-dwellers live a healthier life.

GF, Skylight Tower, 64 Bonham Road, Mid-levels; 2547 8628

[facebook.com/organiccoasishk](https://www.facebook.com/organiccoasishk)

Their Story

Jessie Cheung, the store manager (with almost flawless skin), shares: "When I was 10, I had serious eczema. My skin was like that of a hot sausage straight from the oven. I had to wear bandages and visit the doctor frequently and didn't want to go to school. Some years later I started bathing with powdered ginger. Within two weeks, my skin improved significantly. The problem I'd been suffering for more than a decade eventually disappeared. When my friend opened Organic Oasis, he immediately thought of me, and here I am. We want to promote the idea of living a better life by eating well."

Highlights

- A one-stop shop with organic and gluten-free food, pantry items, frozen organic meat and seafood, natural skincare items and more.
- Staple item: Super-fine ginger powder,

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developed by Baptist University, for bathing or drinking.

- Discounts: Become a member by spending \$500 within a month and you'll get five per cent discount on subsequent purchases. Early bird deal: before 1pm, eight per cent off for a purchase of three items; 12 per cent off for six items.

Organic vs urban lifestyle?

"Chronic fatigue, poor sleep quality, poor digestion and allergic skin are some of the common problems among urban-dwellers in a city like Hong Kong. We tend to ignore these issues because the doctor says they're nothing serious. Then one day something really bad happens. That's a scenario one should avoid. Start eating well. Don't eat things based only on how delicious they are. Eating organic is good, but don't blindly trust everything organic. Check the ingredients, as many healthfood products that aren't certified organic are just as good."

Better skin

- "Many of our expat clients who have allergic skin after moving to Hong Kong are busy people. Stress is a big culprit for unhealthy skin. Take a ginger-powered

bath and relax!"

- "A hot bath helps blood circulation but that's not enough. Superfoods such as spirulina remove heavy metals and toxins from your skin. If you don't like the fishy smell of spirulina pills, try the powder format."
- "If you like tea, think rooibos tea. It's great for skin as it has high antioxidants."



Ginger powder is said to be effective for easing skin problems such as eczema



Jeffrey Chan quit his bank job and opened a fresh organic food shop in Sai Ying Pun

A-Tao's Vegetables

A small but popular shop inside the Sai Ying Pun wet market, A-Tao's specialises in locally grown organic vegetables and fruits. Shop S18-19, Sai Ying Pun Market; 6381 4841. [facebook.com/ataosvegetables](https://www.facebook.com/ataosvegetables)

Their Story

The owner, Jeffrey Chan, explains: "Five years ago, I decided I'd had enough of my bank job. I called it quits and decided to be my own boss. As my mother is a vegetable seller in Sai Ying Pun Market, I naturally got into vegetable retail. But I wanted to do something different from this family business. I noticed a growing interest in organic vegetables in Hong Kong, so I decided my mission would be to sell healthy vegetables and promote a healthier lifestyle. I set off to scout for local organic farmers in the New Territories." Now A-Tao's is one of the most popular vegetable stalls in the wet market on Centre Street.

Highlights

- A vast array of certified organic vegetables and fruits sourced from farmers in the New Territories, e.g., morning glory, red amaranth, red dragon fruits and fuzzy melons (the last two are in season now!).
- Imported fresh items, such as fennel from Australia, cucumber from Australia and organic eggs from the US (the cheapest compared with imported organic eggs from at least three major supermarkets nearby).
- Smiling faces! Chan and his friendly team

are always up for a chat with their local and expat customers, proffering tips on how to cook organic veggies.

Why local organic produce?

- They're cheaper than imported veggies.
- They taste noticeably better than their non-organic counterparts.
- Local produce travels less mileage to get to your kitchen, thereby reducing carbon emissions, cost and energy
- You help support local farmers, who are nowadays facing rising rent for farmland as property developers and speculators are hoarding land in the New Territories for future development. When local organic farms disappear, we'll be left with fewer choices and will have to spend more on imported produce.

Tips on buying local organic produce

- Chan says: "Season is key. In the summer, local beans and melons



A-Tao's retails a variety of fresh veggies from Hong Kong and the West

More organic food markets in town

Until a few years ago, locally grown produce – let alone organic – was very thin on the ground. Ask a wet market vegetable seller whether they sold any Hong Kong veggies and they were likely to look at you askance ("Only from mainland China!" you might be told). But things have changed. The number of certified organic farms has increased from 22 in 2007 to some 150 today. With that comes the growing popularity of organic farmers' markets, which can be found in districts including Central, Quarry Bay and Sai Kung. The one in Central is held twice a week. Farmers come all the way from the New Territories to retail a variety of in-season organic fruits and vegetables. They also display their organic certification to prove their stuff is legit. The one on Sundays is organised by the Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden; the one on Wednesdays by SEED. Treat your tastebuds, support our farmers and enjoy the lively food market atmosphere!

When: Every Wednesday 12noon-6pm
and every Sunday 11am-5pm
Where: Central Ferry Pier No. 7

- dominate; when the temperature drops, leafy greens such as spinach are in abundant supply."
- "Eat them quick. Don't leave leafy greens in the fridge for more than two to three days. The limited or lack of chemicals and artificial fertilisers means organic veggies have a shorter lifespan."
- "Don't worry about the 'ugly' looks of organic veggies. Organic fuzzy melons may look a bit misshapen and organic vegetables may contain more worm holes, simply because of the limited chemicals that can be applied when they are grown."



A vast array of spices and a small dining area are among the appealing features at SpiceBox Organics on Caine Road

SpiceBox Organics

From Indian spices to fresh food to health supplements, you can get almost everything for your household from SpiceBox.

Shop 1, 137 Caine Road, Mid-levels; 2559 9887. spiceboxorganics.com

Their Story

The owner, Punam Chopra, says: "I practically ate organic growing up as that was the way of life in the hills of northeast India. The farmers grew their produce



Owner Punam Chopra is a health coach herself

organically but there was no certification then. I'm a health coach certified by the Institute of Integrative Nutrition in New York. I got into health and fitness more than 20 years ago and taught aerobics in India and yoga in New York. When I moved to Hong Kong in 2006, I wanted to bring a wide range of organic products to Hong Kong, including a variety of organic spices, hence the name SpiceBox."

Highlights

- SpiceBox is an organic business certified by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- Over 95 per cent of their 1,000-plus products are organic, including SpiceBox's branded Indian spices. Recently they've added Japanese pumpkins from Australia to their fresh-food section.
- Online shopping service. Free home delivery for purchases of \$600 or more.
- A dining area serving hot organic meals, coffee and tea.

Why go organic?

"Because that's the healthier way to go. When you eat organic food, you already start working on preventing many potential health issues caused by chemicals and artificial stuff. Your health is strengthened and health span improved. Many people talk about lifespan but I think health span is more important. It's not about how long but how well you live!"

Easy organic recipes: almond milk

Most organic community members featured in this article heap praise on almond milk for its rich nutrients. Almost every organic food shop sells it. But making your own organic almond milk is just as easy. Here's how:



Ingredients and tools

- 1.5 cups of organic raw almonds
- 4 cups of water
- cheese or muslin cloth
- nut pouch, blender and metal strainer

Directions

1. Soak the raw almonds overnight. Wash them the next morning.
2. Put the almonds into a blender. Add 2 cups of water and blend until the almonds are well ground and blended with the water. It should be thick and porridge-like. Add the rest of the water and blend again for two minutes.
3. Place the cheese or muslin cloth or a nut pouch on the metal strainer that is sitting over a bowl. Pour the mixture through the cloth. Press firmly with a spoon until only the almond meal remains. The almond milk is ready! Store in the fridge and consume within three days.

(Courtesy of SpiceBox)

Dos and don'ts of organic shopping

- "Read the labels. Even some organic products have preservatives. Avoid carrageenan, an additive that be found in organic almond and coconut milk. Additives are just not good."
- "Look for certification. Hong Kong still has no legislation regulating the sale and labelling of organic products. So you can call your product organic when it has just a little organic content."
- "Go easy on your dairy-product intake. Try to have nut milk instead. Oat milk is great."



Live Zero has become a sensation since its opening on High Street.

Live Zero Bulk Foods

At Hong Kong's first zero-waste bulk-buy store, you can shop for organic stuff while helping to cut down waste by bringing your own containers or using donated containers. Opened in February, Live Zero quickly became a sensation with a large social media following. Shopping here means you are being kind not only to your health, but also our one precious Blue Planet. 24 High Street, Sai Ying Pun (email: hello@livezero.hk). livezero.hk

Their story

Founder Tamsin Thornborrow says: "I started the company after seeing the amount of waste



At Live Zero, you can buy things in bulk or in small amounts – it's all up to you

Hong Kong produces. Most of the waste in your rubbish bin is just packaging. If you go to the supermarket or even a healthfood store, yes it's organic and healthy, but it's covered in plastic, plastic, plastic."

Highlights

- Over 200 products, with a range of organic produce, from spices and oats to pasta. Over 90% of all the food sold is organic.
- Shopping in this bulk-buy store doesn't mean you have to buy a lot. You can just buy a gram. "Hong Kong's biggest waste is residential food waste. If you buy spices in the supermarket you have to buy like 100g, but do you really need that much?" Thornborrow says.
- Timesaver: "We only stock one type of each product so it really helps to narrow down people's choice and time."

Are organic shoppers environmentally conscious enough?

- "In the last year and a half, I've noticed people are more aware of the BBC documentary *Blue Planet*. It really made people realise we are harming other things."
- We had a very positive reaction when we first opened; it was something that people really liked and needed. But in the first couple of months we needed to educate people about what we were doing and why



there was no packaging. Sometimes people even asked me for a plastic bag."

Little steps

"The easiest steps to save on plastic are just to bring your own bag, or if you forget your coffee cup just stay in and have it. There is always a way around using plastic – people just need to say no!" ^M