

The taste of good health

'Be organic, buy organic.' That's the mantra behind Bio Basics, run by Ramesh Chandran and Sreedevi Lakshmiikutty

SHANTHINI RAJKUMAR

Bio Basics is more than just a commercial venture focusing on organic food. The founders — Ramesh Chandran and his wife Sreedevi Lakshmiikutty — moved to Coimbatore in 2015 after having lived abroad for several years. Here they bought some land and started farming. Soon they realised that Coimbatore was quite willing to adapt an organic and natural mindset.

Also Devi, who had regular interactions with farmers, was alarmed at the increasing rate of farmer suicides. She narrates a horrid incident about a farmer who set fire to his supreme field and walked into three flames. "We cannot bear the pain of even touching the hob with our little finger," she says. "Imagine the despair he would have been feeling to do something like this."

Ramesh and Devi set up Bio Basics a few months ago in order to bridge the gap between farmer and consumer in the simplest way possible. They involve no middlemen, as they are responsible to both producer and consumer.

Their USP is that the fresh produce is delivered to the customer's door with a time lag of just half a day to one day from the time it

is harvested. This is not a venture that will shortchange the farmer nor will it offer the customer poor quality. Therefore they do not negotiate with the farmer. But if the farmer's prices go beyond acceptable limits, they just say that it will be difficult to sell his produce on a consistent basis.

Their trained staff is equally passionate about this venture. They meet the farmers once a week to pick up the harvest and are open about their sources and are willing to address any concerns. They know what is wrong from which farm, that any discrepancies or complaints can be easily traced back.

Customers are contacted via e-mail, WhatsApp or text messages. A list of available produce is sent out every Friday and people have to confirm their orders by Saturday evening. This gives them a couple of days to sort out the concerns. Therefore there is no excess stock and inventories are kept low.

Monday is the day for farm visits. Fruits and vegetables are brought to the warehouse — a cool terra-cotta-lined clay spooce — that evening and sent out by Tuesday mid-morning. There are no unnecessary overhead costs like refrigeration. The fresh and packaged produce are kept separately in a hygienic



(From left) The Bio Basics team with Ramesh and Devi on the right. Getting ready for deliveries. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

manner. Since the team is looking to minimise the use of plastics, deliveries are made in cloth bags of coarse cotton, which are brought back to be reused.

They also use newspaper bags made by children with special needs from Amrit Centre. They also request customers to part with any surplus newspapers, which they then send to Amrit to be recycled or paper bags. The field manager Rishina Kumar, who is also an organic farmer, helps with the delivery.

About 15 farmers around Coimbatore benefit from this venture. Most of the fruits come from the farms of like-minded friends. They offer fruits, herbs, vegetables, oils, pickles, spices, millets and cereals. Fresh produce is completely seasonal and, therefore, based on availability.

Manish Shah from *Itaz*

Course, one of Bio Basics' earliest customers, could not be happier with his decision to go organic. He talks animatedly about how the fruits, especially the papaya, taste. It reminds him, he says, of his childhood when food tasted as it should. Despite the increase in his grocery bill, he is committed to eating organic produce and is a

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staunch supporter of Ramesh and Devi's venture.

Professors Meena Duraisamy and her husband who live in Vaduvalli, have turned completely vegan, thanks to Bio Basics. The vegetables are so tasty that they don't miss non-vegetarian, she says. The fruits are "excellent" and the oils "pure and fresh".

Meena also mentions that the vegetables are denser and have a longer shelf life without refrigeration. She offers this endearing trivia: Though her husband thought her cooking was delicious, he would say it did not match up to his mother's. But now with the availability of fresh and sustainably grown produce, she has overcome that challenge.

Utresh, who moved back to India after having lived abroad for a couple of decades, finds the quality of



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nalleni from Bio Basics to be excellent. He says that he is happy to invest in a sustainable lifestyle as that is beneficial both to the farmer and his family's health.

"By supporting organic farming, we are also helping catch the land and keep the soil fertile," he says, citing the example of Punjab and Haryana where extensive use of pesticides has contaminated the ground water. He compares his home-made potato chips made with organic potatoes to those made with regular potatoes. The difference is so obvious in terms of taste, cooking time and density, he says.

For me personally, shopping with Bio Basics is a boon, as I know well in advance what vegetables and fruits I will get. That makes it easy to plan what I need to buy elsewhere.

Also there is a personal connection with the farmers. For example, this week, we were told that green chillies would not be available because the farmer had hurt his leg and could not deliver.

Another interesting characteristic of Ramesh and Devi's work is their passion to impart information. Their weekly list is not just about what is available, it also includes a food write-up, a recipe one week or information on millets another.

Devi says that people should support their neighbourhood organic stores. Of course, the monthly budget has to be reworked to accommodate the difference but even if one cannot afford to go completely organic, one can always try to strike a balance between what is organic and what isn't.