

Consuming genetically modified food

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Standing on the other side of the fence – how genetically modified food is actually good for us

By Chef Zubin D'souza



It is funny how the world works. We have a wonderful place that can accommodate every kind of people. We need actors and fighters, farmers and politicians and students and teachers. Whatever your profession, you are an important link in the chain. Why am I saying all this? Well, I will be getting back to that point in a bit.

As a chef, I am fully aware of the movement against genetically modified crops. There have been protests, debates and several controversies which have forced people to examine each and every ingredient that gets absorbed by their systems. There has been an organic food movement that often gets coupled with the slow food movement, eco-warriors or terrorists (depending which side you are listening to) who decide to attack companies that deal with products that go against the course of nature. The balances in economies have ensured that one per cent of the world has 99 per cent of the wealth and the disparity between the rich and poor is growing. It is weird then, how, this one per cent gets to decide what the remaining 99 per cent could eat.

Now, I want you to close your eyes and imagine something for me. Hang on! Don't close your eyes or you may not read any further! Imagine a farmer who is trying to provide for his family by growing

rice. Now rice grows well in the coastal areas of our country but the rising sea levels globally often create floods and the result is that the crops get inundated and ruined. The farmer has no rice to sell, the rice prices go up, the government steps in to assist the farmer, the taxes go up and then there is no end to this vicious cycle. Now imagine the alternative if the entire crop had the ability to live for two weeks under water! The farmer would have his crop and dignity intact and we would have rice that was affordable for the masses. So when researchers managed to modify a strain of rice that would survive submerged under water with a breed most commonly used on our eastern seaboard in the states of Odisha and Bengal, marginal farmers stood to benefit the most. Most of these marginal farmers also belong to the lower castes and if there was anything that could be done to support them, I would gladly do it. When the answer to the annual destruction of approximately 50 million acres of rice and the rue of nearly four million farmers is genetically modified rice that can tolerate being underwater, then GM crops do not seem to be the villains that they are painted out to be. When goiter was rampant in our country and the source was tracked to a lack of iodine in our diets, the government immediately ensured that all the packaged salts that were sold were to contain enough iodine to prevent a recurrence of the outbreak and that's why iodised salt is a household name everywhere. Since salt does not really qualify as a living organism, the addition of iodine is accepted but would not be accepted in a plant even though it would be more beneficial for an increasingly changing world and environment. Does this really make sense?

Water is slated to be a scarce resource and predictions have been made that wars would be fought over its control as early as 2050. Bearing this situation in mind, would it really be so bad if we introduce a tomato that consumes less than the approximately 50 litres of water that each tomato consumes on an average as they try to grow in the hot, dry climates where they thrive and where the water could really make a difference to the indigenous populace?

I understand activists and their fear of the unknown. They fear that modified crops could be a source of modified diseases that may be incurable or drug resistant. I understand that they would feel worried when faced with a crop of yellow rice which has been achieved by trying to add beta carotene which is present in carrots and a great source of Vitamin A to the rice. The resultant crop could probably ensure that the thousands of poor in India who continuously suffer from vision issues could actually see clearly without medical intervention. I also understand the view of others when they feel that scientists upset divine intervention when they create pest resistant strains of crops. But till the world has a better way to feed our growing population or treat the several maladies that we face, I am going to be in the corner of genetically modified crops along with the increasing number of people who see them as the saviours that they really are.

(The writer is CHA, CFBE and corporate executive chef of MARS Enterprises)