Canadian scientist aims for balance, chides alarmists in the debate over GM foods

By AMY MARTINEZ STARKE

PANDORA’S PICNIC BASKET

The Potential and Hazards of Genetically Modified Food

Alan McHughen

Oxford, 368 pages, $25

Canadian research scientist Alan McHughen attempts to assure consumers fears about genetically modified foods, criticizes “alarmist media reports” and urges an informed public debate with Pandora’s Picnic Basket.

This information-packed book, part of a new wave of books focusing on genetically modified foods and related issues, is one of the few approaching biotechnology from a positive angle.

Though the book is targeted at a general audience, it contains some highly technical chapters on how genetically modified plants are bred. McHughen is a molecular geneticist who developed and modified hundreds of transgenic strains of limeseed.


Q: Some readers might characterize your book as pro-biotech and enthusiastic about genetically modified foods.

A: I can’t argue with that entirely, but I would qualify that by saying I want to be as fair as I can. I certainly see the potential for harm if we don’t approach this in a sensible manner. We need to concentrate on the real issues and the real hazards.

We have to keep in mind that things can go wrong, and try to point out what things might go wrong. At the same time, I think there is potential in this technology to alleviate some of the problems of the world.

I do think that some people who have blanket objections to GM sometimes have a thinly veiled political agenda. They may not have sincere concerns for the health and safety of these products, otherwise they would be concerned about the health and safety of any new product.

I hope my book will be perceived as balanced. I want people other than scientists and bureaucrats to debate these issues.

Q: You write in your book that “Experts working in the public interest must abandon the paternalistic attitude of ‘Don’t worry, we have everything under control.’” Yet your book is somewhat dismissive of consumer fears and “non-scientific” concerns. You say, “So far there are no documented
ed adverse results from the release of any GM product” and “No one has been harmed by eating GM foods.”

A: This is a statement of fact, not a reassurance. So far, so good. We seem to be doing the right thing through the regulatory process. Let’s continue to regulate the products with the degree of stringency we have now.

Q: You say, “Why target the process when the risk is associated with the product?”

A: Hazards occur from things not from the process through which you make a thing. The final product, say a tomato, may be a new genetic construct, but does it matter, from a health/safety standpoint, how that tomato is generated? The scientific community would say no.

Q: You spend much of the book arguing against more rigorous testing of genetically modified foods.

A: My argument is that we should have appropriate testing, and some people interpret this to mean more regulation. More doesn’t mean better or more efficient. We should target our regulatory approach to the legitimate hazards or risks.

Q: You repeat the frequent food-industry/FDA arguments that labeling genetically modified foods is misleading. Shouldn’t consumers have a choice?

A: I agree you should have that choice. I don’t see the label providing that choice. But labeling is too simplistic and it won’t satisfy anyone regardless of the reason for wanting labeling. I suggest alternatives (such as a public database for all products and all processes so people could choose to select or avoid a particular method).

Q: For example, you write a chapter on how to avoid genetically modified foods. You say, “No one should be forced to accept genetically modified foods, that alternatives already exist, even without going organic, and that market demand will provide more alternatives. How do we make sure people aren’t forced by the marketplace to eat foods they are opposed to?”

A: If enough people say “I don’t want to eat GM tomatoes,” then somebody is going to provide them with tomatoes that are not GM. We have that functionally with organic. The easiest way to avoid GM is to go organic.

I think that will change. Organic growers are going to seek out GM crops that do promote the organic objectives of greater sustainability, reduced chemical usage, better nutrition. That’s not all that far off.

There is no scientific reason that GM is incompatible with organic. The appropriate GM crops can meet the objectives of the organic movement.

Q: Have you considered an unapproved variety of a gene-altered corn in the nation’s food supply. Providing you with your mind about segregation of GM corn from traditional corn?

A: No. It confirmed that mixing of genetically modified (and regular commodities) happens almost every day and it is going to continue to happen. And as long as we have an industry that produces millions of tons of these big commodities, it’s going to happen. Any way around it, I don’t like unapproved products getting into food.

Q: What’s next in genetically modified foods?

A: For now, there are very small companies that are working on the production of a new kind of tomato, for example. The next generation of GM crops is going to be much more sophisticated. We can’t predict what the future looks like in terms of new kinds of crops, but we can predict in general terms that we’re going to see new kinds of crops that are much more sophisticated.

You can reach Amy Starke at 503-221-8534 or by e-mail at amy@starke@news.oregonian.com.

Genetically Modified Food Trend Opposed in Crop of New Books

Passionate writers try
to educate, warn public about biotechnology pitfalls

By AMY MARTINEZ STARKE

The Oregonian

The debate over genetic engineering of foods seems certain to become more polarized with a recent crop of books, all of them opposing one point of view or the other. The new books come at a time when interest in biotechnology is surging.

As recently as 1986, a publisher dropped a potential book critical of biotechnology, giving Monsanto and food biotechnology because of the threat of a lawsuit by Monsanto. The multinational corporation has brought lawsuits alleging misrepresentation of its products.

Now, Monsanto would be hard put to keep up with the explosion of books on this subject.

People feel passionately about their food. As rhetoric about the risks and woes of genetically modified crops has heated up, protests against these GM foods have become a lightning rod for other worries about the relationship of agriculture and industry, about corporate control and about the perceived undermining of local food supplies.

Books on GM foods and GMOs (foods made with organisms that have been genetically modified) are likely to be outdated as soon as they’re published, since technological developments are occurring so rapidly.

Following are a few of the most recently published books for a lay audience, all of them critical of food biotechnology.

For an interview with an author of a pro-biotech book, see accompanying story.

All the books mentioned in both articles are available through the Multnomah County Library.

BITTER HARVEST

A: A Chef’s Perspective of Hidden Dangers in the Foods We Eat and What You Can Do About It

Avery Close with Julia M. Holness

Random House, 278 pages, $24.95

“Bitter Harvest” focuses less on GM foods than on farming practices, and it offers some fascinating reading about the history of agriculture and the politics of food and power.

Anna Cooper (who also writes “A Woman’s Place is in the Kitchen, the Evolution of Women Chefs”) is a longtime chef who now owns a cooking school. She is enthusiastic about organic farming and sustainable agriculture. She offers 20 suggestions for concerned readers, including saving money on imported vegetables and off-season produce; a return to practices such as canning and preserving; and asking grocers what types of farms they support.

GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOOD

A Self-Defense Guide for Consumers

Ronnie Cummins and Ben Lifshitz

Marlowe & Co., 268 pages, $12.95

Genetically engineered, or GE, foods have slipped into our diet without most of us knowing anything about it, particularly this book, perhaps the most basic of the books included here. Ronnie Cummins is director of the Organic Consumers Association, which has a goal of converting American agriculture to at least 30 percent organic by 2010. Lifshitz is with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, which promotes family farms and rural communities.

FARMAGEDDON

Food and the Fate of Biotechnology

Breder Koepen

New Society Publishers, 314 pages, $16.95

“Farmageddon” is an articulate, philosophical advocacy book critical of biotech from a moral standpoint. As the title might suggest, Breder Koepen is opposed to all biotechnology. “Modern biotechnology and genetic engineering are an assault on life… a demand to control” that threatens potential for creation as well as for other cultures. He believes knowing and experiencing the world.

Koepen is concerned about “techno-bureaucracy” and its implications that may have unforeseen long-term consequences.

GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOOD

Changing the Nature of Nature

Max Templon and Kimberly A. Wilson

Interactive Institute, 272 pages, $12.95

“Are we the unwitting and unwilling guinea pigs in the largest experiment in human history,” in which our planet’s ecosystem, food supply, and health and genetic makeup of its inhabitants, is written by the authors of this book, which has a foreword by Ralph Nader.

This is an uncomplicated, easy-to-read introduction to the subject of genetically modified food, and it includes a glossary. Its “what you can do” list includes buying certified organic products, growing your own, and buying seasonally. The chapter on organic seed saving is especially useful.

BEYOND EVOLUTION

The Geneally Modified Future of Plants, Animals, the Earth… and Humans

Michael W. Fox

The Lyons Press, 216 pages, $24.95

Though not a book specifically devoted to food, this thoughtful work moves forward the long-term debate on the possible future usages involved in genetic engineering. Michael Fox is a veterinarian and bioethicist favoring “the environment” and “the creature” and unabashedly writes that he is opposed to the dominant worldwide view of the “rational biotechnology” and fears “the privatization of the gene pool in the hands of a few powerful corporations.” A chapter on transgenic animals, including the authors’ call “genofarms.” Its “what you can do” list includes buying certified organic foods, growing your own, and buying seasonally. The chapter on organic seed saving is especially useful.

Amy Martinez Starke can be reached at 503-221-8534 or by e-mail at amy@starke@news.oregonian.com.