

Wine Spectator article outlines how GMOs might help wine industry

The always heated debate over genetically modified organisms has been boiling over in recent weeks.

While the abundance of opinion and false information certainly isn't helping to progress the debate, it is also, unfortunately, overshadowing some of the real issues that genetic modification might help solve.

The recent flare in media attention has been due largely to articles like ones recently published in [Details](#) and [Elle](#), which have stoked the fires of opposition, giving credence to the idea that the vague and mysterious threat of "unknown consequences" are a good reason to effectively ban GMOs.

These articles have come around the same time that a [New York Times article](#) addressing the bacteria-based threats facing Florida orange farmers sparked controversy when famed food journalist Michael Pollan took to Twitter in response to steer the conversation away from scientific innovation towards his anti-corporate agenda.

Sadly, the excellent New York Times piece by Amy Harmon seems to have been lost in the shuffle, which has detracted from her refreshingly scientific, fact-based argument about GMOs and how they might help solve or prevent threats to many different industries.

While the GMO debate and these recent controversies continue to dominate media attention, there is another interesting issue that seems to be getting lost in the shouting matches between the two "sides" of the GMO debate. This issue focuses on the wine industry and how GMOs might help winemakers protect themselves against future threats.

Earlier this week, Wine Spectator Associate Editor Mitch Frank [posted a blog entry](#) to the magazine's website that suggested GMOs might help protect the wine industry against many different threats, including the same kind of bacteria now endangering the Florida orange.

Threats like a bacterial scourge could bankrupt entire regions and cripple the wine industry beyond repair. While these threats are not immediate, Frank explains, GMOs—specifically the GM tree described in Harmon's article—could be a very real and promising solution to stave off such threats in the future.

The wine industry is already facing several challenges, including [those posed by climate change](#), which threatens to disrupt the ideal growing conditions in famous wine regions such as California's Napa Valley. It makes sense, then, that as they prepare to neutralize current threats, they would try to future-proof their industry as well.

Of course, in today's political climate, the mere mention of GMOs is met with a flood of misinformation and confusion and the wine industry is not susceptible to this controversy. As is the case in any other industry, increasing numbers of protestors and restrictive legislation are very real roadblocks to reaping the potential benefits of GMOs.

In the blog post, Frank writes:

GMOs are controversial, and wine has not been spared. In 2010, activists tore apart an experimental vineyard in Alsace, destroying 70 vines modified to resist fanleaf virus, a widespread affliction in Burgundy and Champagne. Mendocino voters outlawed the planting of GMOs in their county in 2004 (sparing the world both GMO Pinot Noir and GMO marijuana), and this past fall California voters narrowly rejected a proposition requiring special labels for foods containing GMOs.

Amidst the controversy over GMOs, the most important fact about them often goes overlooked. Respected scientists, revered organizations and conservative regulatory and oversight bodies, who rarely agree on the most trivial of details, are all in [complete agreement on the fact that GMOs pose no harm](#) not also found in conventional or organic foods.

Anti-GMO activists try to neutralize this trump card by claiming some vast, global conspiracy between agricultural biotech companies and governments causes one hand to wash the other.

The debate is sure to continue, but Frank's article speaks to the rational middle ground that seems to have disappeared from this and so many other political arguments.

Frank writes:

GMO technology certainly begs for caution—it will take time to fully study the long-term impact. It could have many applications, and while some are worthwhile, others sound dubious. Unfortunately, like the mob in Alsace, some opponents don't want to have the discussion or allow research. They generally speak loudest. Polls show that the public knows little about GMOs, and they're being bombarded with plenty of opinions and few facts.

Frank's point is one that is, unfortunately, a rare thing in the scope of the modern GMO debate. Rather than investigate different options, including GMOs, to objectively determine which one offers the best solution, people inject a startling amount of emotion and subjectivity into the argument, making it nearly impossible to have a real discussion about anything.

He goes on to conclude:

Shouting down and banning a technique that could prove better than existing methods before we truly know the risks is wrong. To prevent mildew, otherwise green-minded grapegrowers spray their fields with permitted copper sulfate. If a vine could protect itself from pathogens, eliminating the need to spray soil with heavy metals, would it be worth it?

Frank's measured and rational argument is the one that too many are ignoring: outside of a zealous few, no one is demanding that GMOs should see widespread adoption immediately. Rather, we should not rule

out the possibility that they have some very unique benefits that might not be available from any other resource.

Thanks to responsible journalists such as Harmon and Frank and their nuanced reporting on these controversial issues, there is hope that we can remove some of the emotion that clouds the conversation and return the debate to the merits and risks of GMOs.

Additional Resources:

- [“How would you stop a vineyard apocalypse?”](#) Wine Spectator
- [“*Elle*’s botched response to previously botched anti-GMO story,”](#) Genetic Literacy Project
- [“A race to save the orange by altering its DNA,”](#) New York Times
- “What happened to the middle in the GMO debate?” Generation Anthropocene