

Ben & Jerry's dilemma: Should the concern be GMOs or artery clogging treats?

Supporting the biggest movement for symbolic purity since commercial adoption of the *hechsher*, the rabbinical seal of kosher approval, Ben and Jerry's ice cream [promises](#) to be 100 percent free of GMOs by 2015.

To show solidarity with the GMO labeling movement, it even [offers](#) a flavor called "Food Fight Fudge Brownie" (not in supermarkets, but in its two ice cream shops in Vermont). Co-founder Jerry Greenfield has just reaffirmed the company's position in an interview [published](#) on DemocracyNow.org.

Its non-GMO pledge evokes images of inspectors walking through the factory where the milk fat and the sugary accouterments are combined into delicious, chilly treats. Inspectors could give their stamp of approval using mass spectrometers, if not candles and feathers, to ensure that any remnants of GMO corn syrup have been successfully removed. At that point, the new batches can get mixed and ice cream lovers can go on to enjoy their treats with no concerns that any ingredient might harm them.

That is, save for the saturated fat that's linked to heart disease ([the leading](#) cause of US deaths), strokes (4th leading cause of death), and type II diabetes (7th leading cause of death), and the sugar that's also linked to type II diabetes. Each serving of Ben and Jerry's Butter Pecan Original Ice Cream, for instance, contains 21 grams of fat, accounting for 67.5 percent of the calories. 10 of those 21 grams are saturated fat, and most of the rest of the calories come from the 18 grams of sugar. To be sure, the same serving does provide four grams of protein, accounting for nearly 6 percent of the calories.

Now, outside of the GMO context, doctors and other health advocates citing quantities of fat and sugar in junk food typically is rebutted with an accusation of extremism. "A little bit won't hurt you," they say, and, after going on about moderation, they rest their case. "This ice cream is just soooo good. It's *worth* the calories!"

That's perfectly logical. Eating healthy most of the time, not smoking, doing exercise, and then selecting desserts carefully, is indeed what moderation means. You won't develop cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease or diabetes from a few deserts, and if you normally eat healthy, a portion of yummy ice cream certainly is worth the calories.

But such a moderation philosophy did not materialize in the interview that Greenfield did with Amy Goodman just [days after](#) GMO labeling measures were defeated in Oregon and Colorado, and after voters in Maui voted to ban GM farming on a temporary basis.

"It is just so hard to imagine that other food companies wouldn't want to tell consumers what is in their food," Greenfield said during a discussion focusing mostly on the money issues, such as how much did the yes and no campaigns spend, and would label requirements really increase the cost of foods, as claimed by the no campaigns.

The interview certainly did not focus on health, because, as Greenfield admitted freely, "We always say

we're not scientists." He meant himself and Unilever, the company that now owns the Ben and Jerry's that he co-founded with Ben Cohen in the late 1970s.

Thus far, the American Medical Association, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and numerous other professional groups have [identified no health or safety issues](#) with any particular GM foods currently in processed food, and many are against mandatory labeling.

Instead, Greenfield emphasized that he's not against GMOs *per se*, and his support of GMO labeling, including the commitment to be GMO-free, is really about the "right to know". Hearing this initially, it seems to dovetail with Ben and Jerry's generally positive civil rights record over the years on issues such as workers rights, gay rights, and removing big business from the political process. Given this record, if Ben & Jerry's is taking a stand on GMO labeling, it's natural to think that the company has pretty strong feelings about the 'right to know' what's in their food.

If so, what is it that people want to know about, particularly when it comes to ice cream? Right now, most Ben and Jerry's flavors don't use GMO ingredients anyway, but some of them include soy and corn ingredients.

Specifically, the corn means corn syrup, the source of a lot of the sugar in many of the flavors. Anti-GMO groups are concerned about corn, because a strain of GM corn (Bt corn) that is used commonly is equipped with a bacterial gene that codes for a pesticide. Most health and science associations do not support labeling of Bt corn, because numerous studies have demonstrated that the bacterial gene, and the protein pesticide for which it codes, pose no threat to human health. The bacterial protein binds to certain receptors in the insect intestine, yet animals, including humans, lack these receptors. Instead, proteins are hydrolyzed by pepsin and hydrochloric acid in our stomachs, allowing the amino acids building blocks to be absorbed from the small intestine into the circulation. The physiology is reassuring, and because the seeds were produced technologically, GM corn has gone through testing much better than most things that we eat.

Whether dangerous or not, in the case of the ice cream, the pesticide from the Bt corn, would not even be there, because corn syrup is just the sugar part of corn that has been extracted chemically from the plant. In that case, the idea of making Ben and Jerry's GMO-free to the point that it can guarantee this on the label really has nothing to do with even the possible presence of the chemical component that might worry people who might buy the product.

Like eating kosher, the move for GMO-free ice cream is about guaranteeing the perceived purity of the food down to the molecule. It's a religious movement, demanding a *hechsher* for our time, guaranteeing the source of the food as much as the food itself. For not only must the food not contain the "forbidden agent", its ingredients also must never have come into contact with the agent.

Dessert is worth the calories and saturated fat can kill you in large enough quantities, but it's not worth risking GMO impurity, even for a spoonful. This view could be what's driving the labeling and GMO free ingredients movement, at least when it comes to processed foods. But soon, assured of the "purity", even those consuming frozen treats that load their arteries with the thickest of plaques can be secure in

knowing they have not been contaminated with GMOs.

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