

## Gary Hirshberg: Stonyfield Organic and Just Label It founder savages science, GMOs

**Gary Hirshberg** (born 1954) is the former president and current chairman of Stonyfield Organic (now owned by Groupe Danone)[1], and is known for his “militant business” practices.[2] Hirshberg leads the “Just Label It” organic industry-funded lobbying initiative to require mandatory warning labels for GMO foods.

Often seen wearing a doctor’s lab coat, Hirshberg promotes organic foods as more nutritious and safer than conventional, marketing his products with such claims as “No Yucky Stuff!” and warns that children who eat non-organic foods are at higher risk of illness, disease and developmental disorders, and that organic foods are more sustainable than conventional foods.

NOTE: The Genetic Literacy Project has an analysis [HERE](#) of Hirshberg’s response to Will Saletan’s [dissection](#) in *Slate* of the hypocrisy and moral emptiness of the anti-GMO movement and leadership.

## Career

Hirshberg grew up in New Hampshire and attended The Derryfield School (private prep) and later graduated with a BA in environmental studies from Hampshire College in 1976. Hirshberg was among the first graduating classes from Hampshire College which opened as an experiment in alternative education with no grades, requirements or structure.[3] Although Hampshire College promotes that more than half of their graduates go on to earn advanced degrees from traditional institutions, Hirshberg did not attend graduate school or earn any subsequent advanced degrees.

In the early 1980s Hirshberg joined the board of The Rural Education Center (TREC), a small organic farming school from which Stonyfield Farms was spawned. Previously, in addition to serving as a trustee of the farming school, he had served as executive director of the now defunct [New Alchemy Institute](#), a research and education center funded by Rodale Organic and dedicated to alternative living with organic farming, aquaculture and renewable energy on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Before launching Stonyfield, Hirshfeld was a water-pumping windmill specialist and an environmental education staffer with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. He also authored books on wind-power and organic gardening.

A New Hampshire native who now lives part of the year in France, Hirshberg has received several honorary doctorates and awards for corporate and environmental leadership. He serves on several corporate and non-profit boards including Simon Equity Partners (Private Equity Firm with holdings in numerous organic product ventures)[4], Honest Tea, Sambazon, Peak Organic Brewing Company, Climate Counts (founder), Renewal Funds (adviser), Applegate Farms, the Rural Education Center (Trustee), GridSolar, The Full Yield, SweetGreen, Glenisk, Solera Capital, RAMP Sports, Climate Counts, Stonyfield Europe and the Danone Communities Fund.[5] He is also the chairman and co-founder of

O'Naturals, a chain of natural fast food restaurants. On January 12, 2012, Hirshberg stepped down from his position as CEO of Stonyfield Farm, naming former Ben & Jerry's CEO Walt Freese as his successor. Hirshberg remains Chairman of the board of directors at Stonyfield.

In 2012 Hirshberg stepped down as president of Stonyfield day-to-day operations to focus on political advocacy efforts, principally his campaign to require mandatory labels on genetically modified foods. He continues to serve as company chairman and an officer of parent corporation Group Danone.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Stonyfield Organic (Groupe Danone)

Images: File:Stonyfield-yucky-stuff.jpg Gary Hirshberg built Stonyfield yogurt into the largest organic yogurt producer in the U.S. with reported \$300 million-plus in sales by marketing his organic yogurt with implied health, safety and nutrition benefits over conventional competitors. Stonyfield marketing campaigns included labeling claims like “No Yucky Stuff” and YoBaby organic line advertisements in new parenting magazines with statements like “Earth to Mom! Yogurts made without the use of antibiotics, hormones and toxic pesticides” and “Synthetic Bovine Growth Hormone – Your baby doesn’t want it” implying competitors products contained things harmful to children.

In 2001 Hirshberg sold 40% of Stonyfield to Groupe Danone and an addition 45% to them by 2005 while retaining 80 percent of management control.<sup>[7]</sup> Hirshberg currently sits on the Danone board of directors.<sup>[8]</sup> In 2005, Hirshberg was named managing director of Stonyfield Europe, a joint venture between Groupe Danone and Stonyfield Farm, with brands in Ireland, the UK and France. To maintain local management control, he was required to maintain double digit sales growth.

To maintain growth Stonyfield no longer has its own farms or cows. Rather than sourcing locally and sustainably, they import organic milk powder from New Zealand, strawberries from China, apple puree from Turkey, blueberries from Canada, and bananas from Ecuador claiming, “It’s the only way to keep the business growing.” Besides, Hirshberg argues, supporting a family farmer in Madagascar or reducing chemical use in Costa Rica is just as important as doing the same at home. At the same time, Stonyfield mental advocacy groups which promote organic interests by protesting pesticides and GMOs.<sup>[9]</sup>



Stoneyfield's “Earth to Mom” initiative the company earns corporate

social responsibility philanthropic credits[\[10\]](#) by directing 10 percent of their profits (\$13 million total reported in 2013) via “Profits for the Planet”[\[11\]](#) which directs funds to advocacy and trade groups whose claims that conventional agriculture practices, including the use of animal health and productivity products, pesticides and GMOs are harmful to human health. Stonyfield advocacy funding includes support for the “Just Label It” campaign, “Dining in the Dark” ads,[\[12\]](#) the Northeast Organic Farming Association,[\[13\]](#) Earth University,[\[14\]](#) International Forum on Globalization (IFG)[\[15\]](#) In addition to philanthropic funding for groups that disparage conventional agriculture practices which bolster Stonyfield marketing interests, in 2013 the campaign began the Stonyfield Blogger Ambassador program to provide direct cash funding, conference sponsorships and product coupons to individuals who would specifically blog and make social media against pesticides.[\[16\]](#)

Stonyfield’s philanthropy has been criticized by New England organic dairy farmers who claimed Hirshfeld wasn’t paying producers as much as it cost them to supply his organic milk, suggesting he should increase his payments to farmers rather than donate to activist campaigns. In a press release on supplier said, “Perhaps Gary’s priorities are misdirected and he should not make so much profit at the expense of organic farmers that lead the way in protecting and preserving the Earth,” says Maine organic dairy farmer Henry Perkins. [\[17\]](#)

Wile Hirshberg criticizes the biotech industry, his company has a joint partnership to develop the market for probiotics with chemical, biotech and agribusiness giant DuPont.[\[18\]](#) In fact, Danone uses DuPont to help ensure their product and plant safety protocols.[\[19\]](#), [\[20\]](#) Hirshberg says he sources his Stonyfield dairy products from Organic Valley.

## **O’Naturals Organic Restaurant Chain**

Hirshberg’s project of launching an all-organic, fast-food franchise has failed to materialize. Co-founded with Pam Solo, Mac McCabe and Jay Friedlander in 1998 the organization reportedly ceased operations and severed ties to Hirshberg by 2012. There appeared to be only one remaining open restaurant in Massachusetts in 2009 while other stores piloted in the region have closed citing poor economic conditions.[\[21\]](#) O’Natural’s still promotes “franchise” opportunities (since 2005) for interested investors willing to pony up between \$764,000 – \$1.02 million to start up a store;[\[22\]](#) however, a 2012 report notes the project “failed” and was re-branded as Stonyfield Cafe, while Hirshberg is now attempting to launch a second organic and natural cafe line in New York City called Chelsea’s Table.[\[23\]](#)

## **Other Business Interests**

Hirshberg is an investor and/or sits on various commercial boards. Including:

- Blue Fish Clothings, Inc.[\[24\]](#)
- Annie’s Inc (aka Annie’s Organic)[\[25\]](#)
- Honest Tea, Inc.[\[26\]](#)
- RAMp Sports LLC[\[27\]](#)
- Sweetgreen, Inc[\[28\]](#)

- SAMBAZON INC[29]



He is a Co-Chair of AGree, an agricultural policy initiative

formed by the Ford, Gates, Kellogg, Rockefeller, Walton and other leading foundations which included among it's goals finding common ground for co-existence between organic and conventional agriculture.

[30] At the same time, Hirshberg is Chairman and a founding Partner of the organic industry lobbying group called "Organic Voices" which runs the "Only Organic" and "Just Label It, We Have the Right to Know" campaigns which oppose conventional farming practices. He is co-author of *Label It Now – What You Need to Know About Genetically Engineered Foods* (New Word City, 2012). All proceeds from the E-book benefit Just Label It. He also is the founder and sits on the board of Climate Counts – a project made up of primarily Stonyfield staff and communications consultants.[31] Hirshberg also is lobbying for a USDA taxpayer and farmer supported "checkoff" program for organic farmers to help defray the costs of organic food marketing to consumers.[32]

Hirshberg claims pesticides are the primary cause of rises in ADHD and children's cancers claiming "chemicals are the major causality" of alarming rising rates of cancer. While countering that organic production is safer, including claiming there is no e-Coli in his organic herds. He also asserts "study after study" shows higher nutrition, higher anti-oxidants, higher yields and lower costs of production using organic production. However in the same speech, he also claims that organic profit margins for companies like his are lower due to higher production costs.[33] In 2011 he issued a video press release where he rapped that moms should choose organic to avoid cancer causing pesticides, scary hormones and GMOs.

[34]

Hirshberg openly states health concerns drive organic growth, stating,

Organic is a growth engine for the economy. What's driving this continued growth? The simple answer is: the public. Every day more people are deciding they want to take control of their health by taking control of their diet. Hardly a day goes by without another story breaking about a food supply scare. Pink slime in our burgers, antibiotics in industrial livestock production leading to antibiotic-resistant superbugs, arsenic in our chicken, salmonella on our cantaloupe – the list goes on.

For others, it can be a more personal life event, such as a pregnancy or a diagnosis of cancer or diabetes, that leads people to a new awareness of how the food they eat affects their health, or the health of their unborn children. In recent years, we've learned that prenatal exposure to pesticides can result in lower birth weight, delayed cognitive development, ADHD diagnoses and even lower IQ. It's been shown that we can avoid many of these risks by eliminating our exposure to pesticide residues in our diets.

As columnist Nicholas Kristof reported in *The New York Times* two years ago, "The President's Cancer Panel is the Mount Everest of the medical mainstream, so it is astonishing to learn that it is poised to join ranks with the organic food movement and declare: 'chemicals threaten our bodies.'" Four out of every 10 Americans will have cancer in their lifetime, the report stated. The 2010 panel, whose members were appointed by the Bush administration, recommended limiting your exposure to chemicals by eating foods produced without pesticides as one way to lower cancer. With cancer, diabetes, obesity and allergens on the rise, people want to know more about their food." He adds, "Organic food production will improve farm profits, reduce national health care costs and help to reduce the dependence and the economic drain of inflating fossil fuels. In short, organic food production is national security."[\[35\]](#)

Hirshberg is an active political donor and lobbyist who has been criticized for benefiting from tax-payer funded programs to support his organic businesses directed from elected officials to whom he and his wife Meg have been large donors.[\[36\]](#)

## **Just Label It**

[See also GLP profile on the [Just Label It Campaign](#).]

Hirshberg is the chairman and national spokesman for the organic industry led and funded "Organic Voices" 501c4 lobbying campaign which runs the "Just Label It" initiative to require mandatory warning labels on GMO foods. Stonyfield directs a percentage of its profits directly to Just Label It via its Projects for the Planet grant program. Hirshberg has appeared on numerous national television programs including HBO's Phil Marr Show and The Dr. Oz Program claiming the safety of GMO foods is unknown and thus requires labels so consumers can avoid them.[\[37\]](#) He has "partnered" with the Center for Food Safety to petition the U.S. FDA to require labels in GMOs.



As to why he leads this initiative, Hirshberg told Rodale Organic,

I'm spending about 90% of my time on GMO issues. This is the moment where we must and can have a national labeling program. The advocates for biotech do a lot of elegant scientific dancing and can tie you up in knots with data. What they don't have any arguments against is that consumers really do have a right to know what is in our food. I have yet to meet a consumer who says "Yes, give me the yogurt with synthetic growth hormones." **As soon as we get labeling, they are in big trouble.** This is the time, this is the administration, this is the climate. People are interested in knowing about their food system. If we don't push for labeling laws now, we'll find we're going to be 100% GMO. A lot of people say the genie is already out of the bottle with GMOs, but we do have a very real chance of getting meaningful regulation right now.[\[38\]](#)



Founding donors Meg and Gary Hirshberg created the Anti

Cancer Lifestyle program at Concord Hospital. It promotes an organic diet to prevent cancer and reduce recurrence for those recovering. The site includes more than 40 pages suggesting eating foods grown with pesticides or GMOs are tied to cancer. They promote the EWG shoppers guide to avoid pesticide-laden foods.[\[39\]](#) Gary Hirshberg frequently incorporates this into his speeches about GMOs and pesticide health risks pointing out that removing toxins from your diet via purchasing organic is preventative health care.

## Wholesome Wave

Stonyfield under Hirshberg was the "founding funder"[\[40\]](#) of Wholesome Wave, a national 501(c)(3) organization that is helping to reshape the American Food system.[\[41\]](#) Wholesome Wave which member Hope Weston claims is "supporting the local farmer with their healthy choices versus the GMO farmer who are making us sick."[\[42\]](#)

## Quotes

**On the cost of labeling** and increase regulations for GMOs, Hirshberg told NPR's Diane Rehm, "It's a lot cheaper than getting sick from overuse of defoliants in creating a nation of birth defects."[\[43\]](#)

On why he is appearing on Bill Mahr to talk about **Proposition 37 labeling campaign**, "My world of course is the world of trying to eliminate inadvertent exposure to toxins... the number one cause of this (cancer) trend is the inadvertent exposure to toxins... primarily (through) food..." Gary Hirshberg at Speak for Less Cancer, October 18, 2012.[\[44\]](#)

**On non-organic food links to cancer:** "How our food is produced determines to a large extent its impact on our health. Not just the kinds of food, but how they are grown. The president's cancer panel predicts 41% of us will get cancer. That is an absolutely devastating statistic. The number one recommendation to change this statistic is to choose foods without the chemicals that are believed to be the causes."[\[38\]](#)

*'Organic animals dont get sick:': "Most people dont know this. Organic dairy cows live two to three times longer... 200 to 300 percent longer than non-organic dairy farms... organic cows just don't get sick..."*[\[38\]](#)

**Jesus Christ and George Washington ate organic foods:** "If you stop and think about it all humanity ate only organic food right before World War II and George Washington ate only organic food, Jesus Christ ate only organic food right, Mozart... our generation's now and of course our children who are who are the guinea pigs in this grand experiment..." Gary Hirshberg at Speak for Less Cancer, October 18, 2012.[\[44\]](#)

**Child illnesses linked to non-organic food:** "Children exposed to higher levels of a type of pesticide found on commercially grown fruit and vegetables are more likely to have ADHD than children with less exposure – recommends organic foods to avoid pesticide exposure... and the idea that you can wash this stuff off is nonsense..." citing Journal Pediatrics and linking pesticides to increased trends in childhood cancers. Gary Hirshberg at Speak for Less Cancer, October 18, 2012.[\[44\]](#)

**GMO safety science is weak:** "The science that would argue for GM foods is pretty weak and fraught with holes but, at the same time, they've done such a good job with the PR..."[\[38\]](#)

**Organic better for your nutrition:** "Nutritionally... the thing you need to do when you walk out of here is to start eating organic. That may sound self-serving and it is, but guess what... you know this is the only way... you can be certain that you're getting full nutrition... when I say certain I mean legislatively certain because there's a law of requires access pasture. That's called the organic regulations..."[\[38\]](#)

**On Séralini Study,** "There was a study released in France ... that showed tumor growth from rats eating GMO corn. By the way this is the first independent study that's been peer reviewed and published. All the studies and GMO have been done by the companies who own on the patents and and you're not allowed to research these seeds without violating the patent. What happened is this French scientists smuggled the GM seeds out of Canada and did a two year study. All the safety studies done by Monsanto are done

for ninety days. And 99% of rats in this study develop tumors...”[38]

**On the Stanford organic meta-study finding no nutritional or health advantages for organics:** “I know some of you saw this unit is this just absolutely extraordinarily pathetic study released by Stanford University ... funded by Cargill, Cargill funding we now know, that said that organic is not more nutritious than conventional. This is what the word that has come out of this is called a manufact-troversy. We had never said in the organic world, we never said it was more nutritious. By the way they only but the vitamins. uh... it’s not about more by and by the way they only but the vitamins and by the way this study John Reganol (sic), and I was just with him last week Washington State, which shows higher antioxidants in organic strawberries than conventional – this study was missed as were about thirty other studies, this was a compilations, this thing was a joke but it was brilliant. By the way the same PR firm working for these guys have worked for tobacco and for big coal and you know how that scam works, again follow the money. I say again, the reason to go organic might be nutritional, we will know that over time. We get higher a antioxidants, but the reality is that the main reason to go organic is to avoid toxins, to avoid pesticides.”[38]

**Changing how you eat to avoid cancer:** “How our food is produced determines to a large extent its impact on our health. Not just the kinds of food, but how they are grown. The president’s cancer panel predicts 41% of us will get cancer. That is an absolutely devastating statistic. The number one recommendation to change this statistic is to choose foods without the chemicals that are believed to be the causes.”[38]

**On yields,** “What I can tell you is when they when they tell me at you know what I debate, I was on Doctor Oz yesterday and they put up woman scientist who says you know you can’t get the yields from organic you can get from conventional. I can tell you I have Iowa State University long-term studies showing higher yields over time similar yields, but much higher economic return of organic versus conventional. I can show you Rodale studies over thirty years showing higher yields. I can show you that the UN in a number of different reports, just recently has said there’s no way we are feeding sub-Saharan Africa without organic and sustainable methods.. That these farmers cannot afford GMO seeds or the chemicals that go with them. We have plenty of data if we’re willing to be scientific.”[38]

**On super weeds:** “What’s happened is that they (GMOs) result in such overuse of herbicides creating a new species of weeds blasted with these toxins, which do not wait around to do focus groups... they just evolved to be coming herbicide resistant their there 22 weeds now on 17 million acres across this country in 26 states that now cannot be controlled by herbicides... they are called super weeds... growing eight feet tall the diameter of my wrist and can stop a combine in their tracks... the only way you can control them with manual physical harvesting... which no farmer can afford...”[38]

## Criticisms

- [Science 2.0](#) Hank Campbell writes, “Stonyfield CEO Gary Hirshberg, the money behind the “Just Label It” campaign, was incredibly uncomfortable hiding behind a weasel phrase like “We’re complying with FDA laws” when a journalist asked him for the ingredients in the ‘natural flavor’ for



his organic yogurt, but he ducked the question just the same. He made sure the Vermont GMO labeling law exempted his company too...”

- [The Fall of Gary Hirshberg](#) by Genetic Literacy Project, editor Jon Entine writes, “You do not sound like a reasoned and wise CEO—the Hirshberg that I used to know—but a shrill propagandist. A reactionary...”
- [Steve Savage](#) accuses Hirshberg of promoting “hate speech... for a new video about farming which is so nasty and misleading that I believe it qualifies as “hate speech” for financial gain. Only Organic, a consortium of organic marketers, hired a professional ad agency to produce a YouTube video staging a fake elementary school performance about Old MacDonald vs New MacDonald—a critique of conventional farming.” Noting, Gary Hirshberg is the primary spokesperson for “Only Organic.”
- [Science Babe](#) Kavin Senapathy writes, “In less guarded moments, Hirshberg makes it clear that the labeling movement has nothing at all to do with science, information and discourse—it is exclusively an anti-GMO effort. Hirshberg has become a millionaire many times over selling pricey organic foods promoted with labeled marketing claims like “No Yucky Stuff,” which falsely suggests that more affordable conventional products are somehow unsafe and inferior. “Because GMOs are not labeled in the U.S., they might be causing acute or chronic effects,” Hirshberg has also written. That’s what Orwell would call The Big Lie.
- [The Roots Of The Anti-Genetic Engineering Movement? Follow The Money!](#), by Henry Miller & Jay Byrne, Forbes Magazine, October 22, 2012. “*Organic CEO Gary Hirshberg that genetically engineered crops are inadequately tested and, even worse, responsible for widespread adverse health effects. (The scientific and medical communities categorically deny such allegations, of course.)*”
- In 2006 Hirshberg was criticized for sourcing cheaper powdered organic milk from as far away as New Zealand for Stonyfield Yogurt claiming insufficient supply of domestic organic dairy products to meet the high demand for his products[56]; however, at the same time Hirshberg was being criticized by New England organic dairy farmers for paying them unfair prices for their milk (less than it costs them to produce) citing insufficient demand and oversupply.[17]
- [Truth About Trade and Technology](#) Bill Horan writes, “The anti-biotech activist Gary Hirshberg, Stonyfield Farms CEO and recent White House nominee to a trade advisory committee, seems to enjoy highlighting bad news. Even when it’s bogus—when the news is in fact not bad at all—he manipulates it to serve his personal, ideological campaign against modern agriculture... He has an agenda—not a scientific agenda of truth seeking, but rather a political agenda that aims to scare people. Sadly, it has nothing to do with human safety or scientific truth.”

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