Vani Hari (Food Babe): Does inability to understand science of food make one an expert on GMOs and chemicals?

**Vanie Deva Hari** (a.k.a. The Food Babe) (born 1979) is blogger, former banking executive and food and Democratic party political activist who publishes the food blog “Food Babe” from her home in Charlotte, North Carolina. [1] Her blog is sponsored by alternative health, natural and organic product marketing advertisers. Hari announced the launch of her own television program “Food Babe TV” in September 2013. [2]

Hari has come under increasing criticism over the past year from journalists and bloggers for a number of her public stands and statements:

- [Is The Food Babe A Fearmonger? Scientists Are Speaking Out](#), NPR
- [Evolution of Food Babe: From misguided consumer advocate to crude bully](#), Genetic Literacy Project
- [Vani Hari, a.k.a. “The Food Babe,” finally responds to critics](#), David Gorski
- [Letter to the Food Babe](#) by students in training at the IFT Student Association posted on Science Meets Food
- [Anti-GMO activist Food Babe tries to do good things but arguments are ‘silly’](#), Charlotte Observer
- [FOOD BABE: POT, MEET KETTLE](#), The Farmer’s Daughter

**Career**

- Founder, Food Babe, LLC, April 2011 – Present (2 years 3 months) Charlotte, North Carolina Area
  - [http://foodbabe.com](http://foodbabe.com) is a website dedicated to organic living, healthy travel and food policy.
- Panelist, Charlotte Society of Professional Journalism, 2012 – 2012 (less than a year)
- Product Manager – Mobile Banking, Ally Financial Inc., April 2009 – November 2011 (2 years 8 months)
- Senior Consultant, Bank of America, January 2008 – April 2009 (1 year 4 months)
- Vice President, Wachovia Corporate Investment Bank, February 2005 – January 2008 (3 years)
- Web Services Manager, Bank of America Financial Services Solutions, 2004 – 2005 (1 year), Leading provider of mortgage and home equity lending services for U.S. Banks. Providing software and complete private label loan origination and fulfillment services on a national basis. A joint venture company with ownership between Accenture; Bank of America and Fidelity National Financial.
- Senior Consultant, Accenture, 2002 – 2004 (2 years)

**Education**

- University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Bachelor of Science, Computer Science, 1998 – 2001
Food Babe

Vani started FoodBabe.com in April 2011 to “spread information about what is really in the American food supply. She teaches people how to make the right purchasing decisions at the grocery store, how to live an organic lifestyle, and how to travel healthfully around the world. The success in her writing and investigative work can be seen in the way food companies react to her uncanny ability to find and expose the truth.”

Frequently called a “mom blogger” and while married Hari has no children. She claims, “After receiving tremendous attention on her posts about Chick-Fil-A, she was invited by the company’s leadership to meet at its headquarters to consult on specific improvements to ingredients used by the national chain. Other major food companies that have responded to her writings include Kraft, Whole Foods, McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Chipotle, Yoforia, and Moe’s South West Grill.”

Hari writes her, “activism brought national attention at the Democratic National Convention when she used her status as an elected delegate to protest in front of the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture on the issue of GMO labeling. Vani has been profiled in the New York Times, USA Today, Washington Times, Chicago Tribune, appeared on The Dr. Oz Show, Good Morning America, CNN, Inside Edition, NBC News, Fox News and is a regular contributor on NBC’s Charlotte Today.”

According to the Independent Women’s Forum (IFW) Hari commercializes here advocacy for profit through various alternative, organic and natural health sponsors and programs targeting health anxious moms, noting, “She now offers a pay-for-service meal plan that promises to keep you on course and far away from all those GMOs. Her plans range from $17.99 a month to $119.88 a year. She also makes money by selling advertising on her website for organic food products.”[3]

The Charlotte Observer noted in 2014, Hari’s blogging has earned her “a book contract with Little, Brown (“The Food Babe Way,” due out in February, on her organic lifestyle), a William Morris Endeavor agent to handle her TV appearances and a website packed with advertising and product endorsements. You can even buy an eating-plan subscription for $17.99 a month…”[4]

Advocacy

Vani Hari became a food blogger and food health campaigner in 2002 to follow and promote personal health issues.[5] Her website notes frequent paid or sponsored speaking engagements at organic, natural product and alternative health conferences. Hari has also amplified anti-vaccine advocacy urging her followers no to get annual flu shots.[6] She has campaigned against Chipotle, Chic-fil-A, Anheuser-Busch, Kraft, and other corporate targets.
Chick-fil-A antibiotics

Claims here publicity and meetings with Chic-fil-A starting in 2012 forced the company to adopt an antibiotic-free sourcing of their chicken.[7]

Kraft Macaroni & Cheese

Hari with ally Lisa Leake launched a campaign to have Kraft remove artificial food coloring from their brands of Macaroni & Cheese including a 2013 petition via Change.org.[8][9]

Beer Ingredient Labeling

In June 2014 Hari launched a petition to ask Anheuser-Busch and Miller Coors, America’s largest beer brands to disclose their full set of ingredients including GMOs.[10]

Subway Bread and Azodicarbonamide (yoga mat) campaign

Hari targeted Subway for the use of azodicarbonamide, a bleaching agent and dough conditioner used in a number of products. Subway announced in April that it would remove the ingredient. [11]

GMOs, Labeling & Wheat

Hari claims to be “a passionate advocacy for GMO labeling” and was a featured speaker at a 2012 California Prop 37 campaign fundraiser.[12] and has used reports (May 2013) of findings of unapproved GM wheat linked to Kraft Macaroni and Cheese UK labels claiming “may contain GM wheat” to lobby mothers to stop feeding their children these products as unsafe.

Hari claims, “the whole reason she became a delegate was so she could lobby against the increasing prevalence of genetically modified food (GMOs)—agricultural crops that have had their DNA changed by genetic engineering techniques. Opponents of GMOs believe those foods may have serious health risks that are not yet fully understood. Many countries require special labels for food that has been genetically modified, but the United States does not.”[13]

Hari is a member of the “GMO INSIDE” steering committee with Jeffrey M. Smith and sponsored by Nutiva and Nature’s Path Organic.[14]

Criticisms

- Dr. Joe Schwarcz at McGill University’s Office for Science in Society (separating sense from nonsense) told the Montreal Gazette, “Hari does not have any sort of degree in food science or chemistry, but that does not seem to be an impediment when it comes to telling us that “we are
getting conned by cheap, toxic chocolate” or that our beer is chock full of “shocking ingredients” or that “butter is secretly ruining our health.” No, it isn’t because of the fat or the cholesterol in the butter, she says. It’s because of the genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the corn or soy that the cows are fed. It doesn’t take more than a quick perusal of Food Babe’s blog to reveal that she has no understanding of what genetic modification is all about.”[15] Schwarcz claims, “It isn’t hard to deconstruct her arguments.” he said. “Most of them are so silly. Her basic tenet is guilt by association.”[4]

- Dr. William Schaffner, chair of the Department of Preventive Medicine at Vanderbilt University says of Hari, “She takes facts that may be technically true, but then she runs with it and goes down roads that are inappropriate and frankly misleading,” he says. “There’s facts there, but then they’re misinterpreted.”[4]

- Respectful Insolence science blogger David Gorski says Hari uses “deceptive tricks” and is a “font of misinformation” and likens “the Food Babe is to food as Jenny McCarthy is to vaccines…” adding, “There’s no doubt that the Food Babe is photogenic and also has a talent and penchant for making her utter ignorance of chemistry and science work for her as a powerful P.R. tool that has catapulted her from an obscure food blogger to a guest on television shows such as The Doctors and that repository of all medical crankery and quackery,” Gorski goes on to note, “That dark side (of the Internet) consists of people like Vani Hari. No Internet, no Food Babe, no chemically illiterate, scientifically ignorant rabble rousing. How did she get her start? What are her qualifications? The second question is easy to answer. She has no relevant qualifications. She isn’t a scientist. She isn’t a doctor. She isn’t a dietician. She has no training in nutrition. It’s not for nothing that she’s been referred to as the Mike Adams of food activism, which is not a compliment.” “Vani Hari has been a malignant force promoting ignorance about food. Sure, mixed in with all the pseudoscience, antivaccine beliefs, and admiration of cranks like Russell Blaylock.”[18]

- Mark Crisplin of Science Based Medicine write of Hari, “She is evidently self-taught, having her undergraduate degree in computer science, and her essay on the influenza vaccine suggests her institution of higher learning forgot the science part in her degree… I admire the way Food Babe can take a complex and nuanced topic and distill it down to an aliquot of pure error. It is a talent rarely seen outside of the Tea Party… It is hard to find an example of a piece of writing where virtually every piece of information is wrong. And when there is a nugget of truth my first response is to question my knowledge. If Food Babe says it, it must be wrong.”[6]

- The Charlotte Observer writes of Hari, “In interviews with food-policy advocates and academics, she is criticized for sensationalized and overblown claims. Other activists say she takes more credit than she deserves. And in some cases, the Observer found evidence of errors and inconsistencies.”[4]

- Even Aaron Huertas, science communication officer for the Union of Concerned Scientists, says, “she gets the science wrong” and she “oversold dangers” and “misreads studies…”[21]
Van Hari responded to mounting criticism with a summary post in December 2014: Food Babe Scam: My Response To The Attacks On Me and Our Movement

“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win. – Mahatma Gandhi

We are close to winning.

Over the last three years, the coalition we have built, the Food Babe Army, has had an incredible amount of success and been featured in major newspapers, magazines, on radio stations, and TV shows across the globe. Together, since we as customers control the income for corporate agribusinesses, they are starting to pay attention.

With this much game-changing activism and success in a short period of time, it comes as no surprise that some powerful corporate executives and some “independent” voices they help to finance, disagree with our work. An intelligent debate is welcomed, but not all the discussion has been civil.

There’s a group of aggressive scientists, biased doctors, skeptics, agribusiness publicists, lobbyists (and their anonymous webpages and social media sites), along with in some cases, well intended but misinformed people (influenced by propaganda) attacking our work, other consumer advocacy groups, my partners, my friends and me, personally.

Did you think the powerful chemical companies and food giants of the world were going to let us waltz right into their world and turn it upside down?

No – they won’t and, as I expected, the people who wish to keep the status quo are attacking me personally while simultaneously trying to discredit the entire Good Food Movement.

Bibliography & Resources

- Vani Hari LinkedIn Profile
- Vani Hari on Facebook, Joined 2010 as “voice green”
- Vani Hari Food Babe on Facebook
- Food Babe on Twitter

Other Contact Info
References