

Eat, Drink and Be Wary

Reviewed by Marion Nestle
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FOOD, INC.

Mendel to Monsanto -- The Promises and Perils of the Biotech Harvest

By Peter Pringle

Simon & Schuster. 224 pp. \$25

In this latest account of the arrogance and unfulfilled promises of the international corporations that produce genetically modified (GM) foods, Peter Pringle takes on a formidable challenge. At the behest of the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded this study, he resolves to explore and demystify the language and politics of GM agriculture from the "eerily deserted" middle ground.

In challenging both the "bland assurances" of the proponents of this technology and the "scaremongering" of "environmental ideologues," he invokes the proverbial plague on both their houses. Contrary to his intention, however, Food, Inc. demonstrates how difficult it is to maintain neutrality in debates about the necessity or value of GM foods. Instead, this book is a compelling indictment of corporate power exercised under the guise of altruism.

Food, Inc. presents lively and colorful accounts of events on the biotechnology battlefield -- the successes and failures of the Green Revolution; the development and fate of Flavr Savr tomatoes, Golden Rice and StarLink Corn; the effects of GM corn on Monarch butterflies; the escape of bioengineered genes into Mexican native corn and organic crops; the refusal of African nations to accept GM crops as food aid. He also takes on less familiar topics, among them the history of rice cultivation, Soviet searches for new staple plants and the botanical mysteries of apomixis (asexual plant reproduction).

In preparing this book, he talked to most of the leading participants in debates about GM foods, represents their views fairly and, as promised, neither rants nor raves. He gets the science right and enables any reader to understand the arcane language of this trade -- Cry9c proteins, PG gene cassettes, nptII genes, 35s promoters. In explaining the science in each case, Pringle develops one overarching theme: how international corporations use genetic techniques to accomplish an "intellectual property grab" and control food production.

Although companies insist that their purpose is to increase the agricultural productivity of the developing world, they patent GM techniques and products; patenting corrupts that promise. Ironically, the scientists developing the most frequently cited example of the potential benefits of GM foods -- rice enriched with beta-carotene -- had to negotiate their way around dozens of privately held patents. The patenting of indigenous plants -- basmati rice, jasmine rice, the neem tree, azufrado beans -- treats developing nations as nothing more than markets waiting to be tapped. International intellectual property

agreements further support the appropriation of poor countries' genetic resources by a "growing army of clever patent lawyers, mostly American, who [file] increasingly complex and broad claims."

To enforce patent rights, corporations lobby governments; governments do little to intervene when companies take even unintentional patent violators to court. Although corporations claim that GM foods will prevent worldwide malnutrition, their true intent is a "mining operation -- extracting maximum output from the land in the shortest possible time" with little concern about environmental consequences and only the barest evidence of environmental benefits. In documenting these charges, Food, Inc. presents a dismaying account of the "arrogance of corporate control and the failure of government regulations."

But what of the ideologues who oppose GM foods? Pringle identifies three types: rejectionists, who deny the value of GM foods for religious, environmental or safety reasons; reformists, who demand labeling of GM foods; and organic growers, who are threatened by the incursion of wayward GM genes into their crops. Foundations, he says, pour millions of dollars into such groups. (But which foundations or groups? He doesn't say.) Although most antibiotechnology advocates issue "responsible challenges to an industry -- behaving irresponsibly," he faults their rejection of GM foods as scientific distortions and scaremongering exploitation of "tragic fears of GM" -- calling them Frankenfoods, for example.

GM groceries are not Frankenfoods, he says: "The changes are not inherently unsafe, nor are the companies that produce them inherently evil." Corporations hijacked the technology for their own purposes, and activists raised "awareness beyond its usefulness and turned it into scaremongering." But by what other means might the public act to raise questions about overweening corporate power unchecked by government oversight? Pringle provides no road map for advocacy. Instead, he urges biotechnology companies to get back on track, focus on fulfilling promises to feed the world, explain the science to the public, label GM foods and be more generous with patents. He wants the governments of rich countries to end agricultural subsidies so poor nations can compete on international markets.

Such advice is eminently sensible. Unless corporations and governments change their stance, Pringle's middle ground is likely to remain underpopulated. More and more people throughout the world are likely to find themselves increasingly sympathetic to the rejection of GM crops by poor countries, to demands for more stringent government oversight and to the scaremongering tactics of those pesky antibiotechnology ideologues.

Marion Nestle's most recent book is "Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism."