



First Fruit: The Creation of the Flavr Savr Tomato and the Birth of Biotech Foods

Belinda Martineau

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In 1994 a little biotech firm called Calgene introduced the Flavr Savr (TM) tomato, the first genetically engineered food ever brought to market. Like most scientists working in agricultural biotechnology, the people who created the Flavr Savr (TM) hoped eventually to develop more important crops, ones that would be higher yielding or insect and disease resistant, thus enabling farmers to feed more people and reduce their dependence on dangerous chemicals. But the people at Calgene knew that before genetic engineering could reform high-tech agriculture, it would first have to achieve acceptance by the public. So they started with the Flavr Savr (TM), a tomato whose rot-initiating gene was turned off. The idea was that the modified fruits would retain enough firmness so they could be left on the vine until they began to ripen. "Normal" tomatoes are picked green and then gassed red before making their appearance in the supermarket; otherwise they'd be smashed during shipping. At the time the Flavr Savr (TM) was being developed, American consumers were spending \$4 billion on supermarket tomatoes, despite the fact that almost no one believed they tasted like a tomato should. The strategy was to win American consumers' tomato-loving hearts with the "summertime taste" of the Flavr Savr (TM), and the rest would follow. Belinda Martineau served on the scientific team that developed the Flavr Savr (TM), and when Calgene voluntarily submitted its product for FDA and USDA approval, Martineau provided most of the scientific evidence that led to its certification as safe for human consumption. Martineau concurred with Calgene's belief that the approval process would inform the public of the pros and cons of genetically modified foods. Yet ultimately the process of engineering the Flavr Savr (TM) and bringing it to market made her question the validity of the product. The Flavr Savr (TM) was generally accepted by the public, despite some fierce opposition by environmentalists and consumer advocates, yet it did not prove to be commercially viable. Though its introduction did engender discussion of the ethical, environmental and scientific issues surrounding agricultural biotechnology, the debate was squashed when ag-tech giant Monsanto bought Calgene and the process of engineering food "went underground". While genetically modified foods must be labelled in Europe, and the controversy over their safety is headline news in the UK, American consumers are eating a significant amount of them without even being

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