

MAPP annual report 2000

There is no accounting for tastes! – Product advantages and tasting reduce consumers' scepticism towards genetically modified foods

Many studies have shown that consumers are very sceptical towards genetically modified foods. They call them 'Frankenstein foods' and are not convinced when experts and the food industry claim that there is no difference between genetically modified foods and food products they normally buy. However, a new study carried out by MAPP in collaboration with researchers in Norway, Sweden and Finland indicates that consumers' scepticism is reduced when they taste genetically modified foods and experience that the products are more tasty and more healthy than similar conventional products.

In connection with the study we asked 745 respondents from Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland to taste eight different cheeses. Three weeks later we sought out the same respondents asking them to taste another two cheeses. The respondents were indifferent to cheese 1 at the first tasting, whereas they thought cheese 2 was the best of them all. The respondents, of course, didn't know that the two cheeses were among the ones they had tasted the first time.

Before the second tasting, 2/3 of the respondents were told that the cheese they liked the best was genetically modified. Half of the respondents who believed they tasted genetically modified cheeses, i.e. about 1/3 of all respondents, were also told that the cheese was low in fat as a result of genetic engineering. Having tasted the cheeses, the respondents were given descriptions of genetically modified cheese. The descriptions varied with regard to fat content, fatty acids content, price and added calcium and zinc. Moreover, the product descriptions differed in relation to whether genetically modified rennet had been used or not.

In all four countries consumers attached most importance to the type of rennet. Also price was considered important whereas fat content and additives meant less. The most interesting result of the study was that consumers believing they had tasted genetically modified cheese were significantly less negative towards the use of genetically modified rennet than consumers who weren't given any information. Consumers who were led to believe the genetically modified rennet resulted in lower fat content were the ones least negative.

All in all there are many indications that consumer would be less negative towards genetic engineering if they had a chance to experience that genetically modified foods taste a lot better than the products they usually prefer.

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Thumbs down for genetically modified foodstuffs

Many researchers and food companies strain at the leash to use genetic modification. Consumers, on the other hand, reject GM food products. This is one of many results of a EU funded project about consumers' attitudes and decisionmaking with regard to GM food products.

Consumers' scepticism towards GM food products is caused largely by a general concern regarding health and environmental consequences. Genetic modification is to a much higher degree linked with risks than with advantages. Risks are not perceived only as risks to oneself but also to close family and future generations. The perceived risks also influence how possible advantages that have been built into the products by means of genetic modification, are perceived. In general, advantages therefore cannot counterbalance risks in the mind of consumers.

Consumers' aversion towards GM food products can also be explained through their general attitudes. The group of consumers that do not like new and different products, are relatively more averse to GM food products. This also goes for consumers who are concerned about nature and who in general believe that man has no right to rule over plants and animals as well as for consumers who have a negative attitudes towards technology in general.

Much points to the fact that consumers' aversion towards GM food products is quite stable. In the study, increased information on GM did not increase consumers' acceptance of GM food products. Furthermore there is evidence that consumers reject genetic modification in general without considering specific applications. This may, however, change if more GM food products with obvious consumer benefits are introduced to the market.

The study has dealt with attitudes towards GM food products in Denmark, Germany, Great Britain and Italy. The overall picture is the same, but there are some differences. For instance the aversion towards GM food products is most pronounced in Denmark and Germany. The importance of perceived risks is lower in Italy than in the other three countries.

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