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Biotech-created tomatoes ripe for controversy

Marketers brace for activists' knife

By Bradley Johnson

This could be the "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" or the solution to decades of bland vegetables.

Biotech tomatoes will roll into supermarkets next year, and marketers must decide what to say about the products' origins. The produce is engineered to be fresher and better tasting year-round.

But a consumer activist is leading a campaign to wither the tomatoes even before they arrive.

Calgene Inc., a decade-old biotechnology company, expects to introduce the first genetically altered tomato, *Flavr Savr*, a year from now.

DNA Plant Technology Corp. in the second quarter of next year plans to conduct a major single-market test of *Vinesweet*, a tomato that has its roots in a petri dish. The company hopes to follow that in 1994 or 1995 with what, in its crudest terms, is akin to a tomato crossed with a flounder.

A decidedly different campaign is being orchestrated by Jeremy Rifkin, president of Pure Food Campaign, a group formed last spring to fight genetically altered foods.

Mr. Rifkin, who's concerned

about potential effects of genetically altered foods on health and the ecosystem, said he's working on TV and radio public service announcements and plans to take out page ads in *The New York Times*.

Mr. Rifkin also said he has the backing of 1,500 "celebrity chefs," such as Wolfgang Puck of Los Angeles.

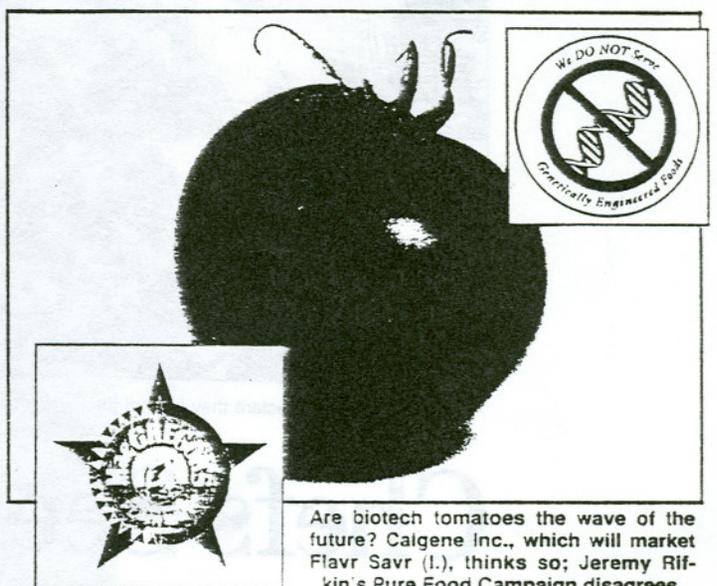
He intends to single out any packaged-food marketer that experiments with genetic engineering. "We're going to give Calgene more publicity than they could ever have hoped for," Mr. Rifkin said. "We promise them [*Flavr Savr*] will be dead on arrival."

Stephen Benoit, VP-marketing at Calgene Fresh, Calgene's marketing arm, said the public's fears of biotech food are greatly exaggerated.

"The vast majority of consumers are actually favorably disposed toward food biotechnology," he said.

Calgene plans to introduce *Flavr Savr* regionally next year, with national expansion "a function of consumer acceptance and tomato supply," Mr. Benoit said. The produce will sell at roughly a 30% premium over regular tomatoes.

The company doesn't have the



Are biotech tomatoes the wave of the future? Calgene Inc., which will market *Flavr Savr* (l.), thinks so; Jeremy Rifkin's Pure Food Campaign disagrees.

money to advertise. But it plans "full disclosure" of the tomato's origins in point-of-purchase materials and through an 800-number, Mr. Benoit said.

Calgene alters the genetic makeup of its tomato to retard rotting, allowing the produce to ripen on the vine longer. That's in contrast to the typical supermarket tomato, which is picked green and gassed with ethylene to ripen.

Calgene must maneuver carefully, observers say. Jack Trout, president of marketing consultancy Trout & Ries, said the company should avoid "trigger words" such as "genetically altered" or "genetically engineered."

"That's going to be the most critical element of how they define their product," he said. "It's a word game."

Clive Chajet, chairman-CEO of Lippincott & Margulies, a corpo-

rate identity and image company, suggests Calgene emphasize product benefits.

"You can't mislead the public," he said. "You have to be prepared to answer how in fact you ended up with a better-tasting tomato."

DNA Plant Technology's *Vinesweet* tomato looks far less ripe for controversy. *Vinesweet* begins on a petri dish with cells extracted from a tomato plant. There's no genetic engineering, and Mr. Rifkin said he hasn't taken a position on it yet.

Marketing plans call for a six-month test in an unnamed city in the second quarter of next year. DNA Plant Technology is currently testing ad strategies in focus groups.

The company's other tomato is sure to spawn controversy, however. That product will include man-made protein similar to that produced by flounder genes. □