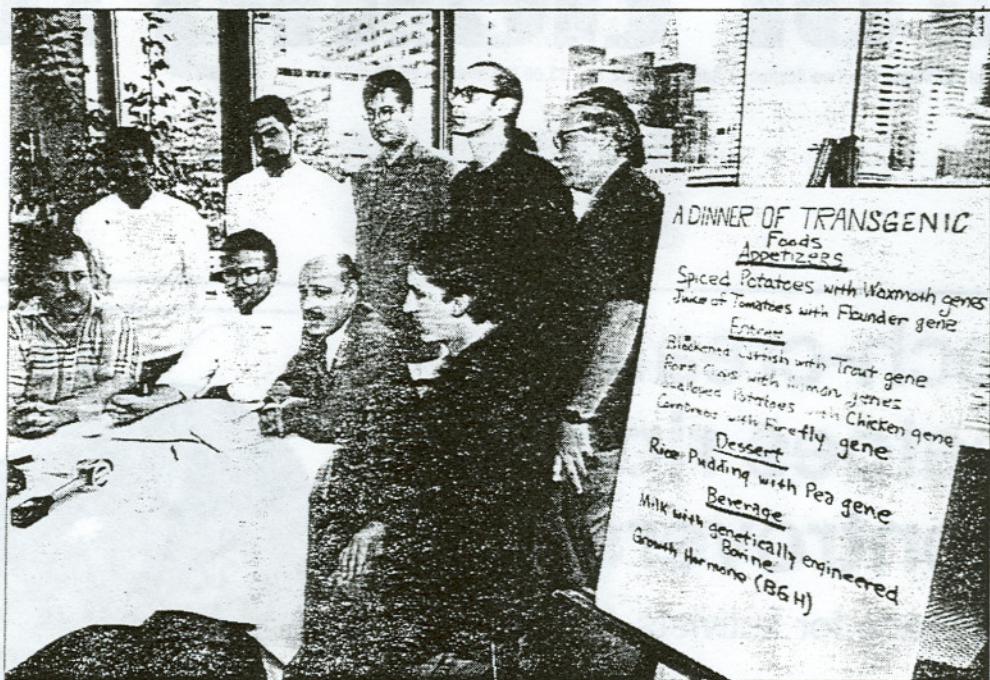


MANHATTAN New York Newsday EDITION

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 3, 1992 • MANHATTAN • 35 CENTS



Chefs gather to declare they will not jump into the gene pool and swim with bioengineered produce.

Newsday / Alan Raza

Chefs See Red Over The Genetic Tomato

By Lynn Darling
STAFF WRITER

Just when you thought it was safe to visit trendy New York restaurants again.

Gone are the megadecibels bouncing off innocent eardrums, the two-hour waits for a table reserved three months in advance, the 12-year-old anorexic models not eating their fried calamari with their investment banker boyfriends. In their place a new age beckoned, a recession-inspired era of family style menus, country style cooking and entrees priced at levels actually lower than the GNP of Rwanda.

But that was before the attack of the Killer Tomatoes, the March of the Mouse-Enhanced Pear Flambee, the possibility of a kinder, gentler, altogether more human green bean. That was before genetically altered food.

Last week the Food and Drug Administration announced new guidelines that would exempt most genetically engineered food from special testing before it reached consumers. In addition, the new policy does not require any special labeling of genetically altered foods, making it impossible to tell a potato crossed with a flounder gene from the more run-of-the-mill variety.

Defenders of the foods say that biotechnological tinkering will result in foods that are generally more nutritious, better tasting with a longer shelf life: a genetically altered tomato may be on the market as early as next spring.

Yesterday, the men in the white toques came riding to the rescue. A group of New York City restaurant chefs got together at the Water Club to announce their solidarity in combating the latest threat to fashion-

Now, you might think that an industry that has always reveled in the new — embracing everything from sea urchin mousse to lobster in vanilla sauce — would jump at the chance to serve a cornbread that glowed in the dark. But this is the '90s, when words like purity and natural and wholesome roll more righteously off the tongue.

"I will not sacrifice the entire history of culinary art to revitalize the biotechnology industry," Rick Moonen, executive chef of the Water Club and the organizer of the effort had declared in a press release.

"This is an historic moment," said veteran Washington activist Jeremy Rifkin as he sat amid the Water Club's snowy white tablecloths. He was surrounded by chefs from the Russian Tea Room, An American Place, Tatou, and more than 20 other top city food gurus. "New York City's finest chefs see this as the beginning of a local boycott of these brave new world foods," Rifkin said he was excited by the chefs' "grass roots efforts" to prevent the new foods from ever darkening a diner's plate.

A small wrinkle in the plan soon presented itself, however. How do you boycott a genetically altered kiwi when there's no way of telling it from the real thing?

"Step one is mandatory labeling," said Moonen. Until then we have no way of knowing." He said the group would first concentrate on "reaching out" to City Council Speaker Peter Vallone and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Mark Green, for help.

But Rifkin, who is president of the newly created Pure Food Campaign, says his organization plans to initiate lawsuits against every genetically altered food brought to the market, if the FDA doesn't change the new guidelines.