



A Tale of Two Spuds: The tasty alternative to GM potatoes

March 2010

As the EU causes uproar by approving the first Genetically Modified crop in 12 years (BASF's GM "Amflora" potato) and Defra have to decide whether to license two GM potato trials in England, the humble potato is again making headline news. Potatoes are at the frontline of a battle against the GM industry. GM Freeze, the Gaia Foundation, the Sárvári Research Trust along with Konstam restaurant, turned up the heat on this pressing issue by holding a taste-in of non-GM blight resistant potatoes.

Blight resistant potatoes will appeal to UK farmers. Blight threatens harvests each year and can wipe out a whole crop in a matter of days. In recent years blight has been particularly damaging to farmers' livelihoods, thanks to a new strain of blight and a series of very wet summers, creating conditions in which the disease can thrive. Multiple applications of fungicides are routinely used to prevent the disease from taking hold and completely devastating the crop. In May, the John Innes Centre in Norfolk is planning to start field trials of a GM blight-resistant potato. They hope that commercialisation may take place within 5 years.

However the advantages of blight resistant potatoes are already available naturally from The Sárvári Research Trust, without any need for genetic modification. Dr David Shaw, Director of the Trust, explains:

"Potato varieties grown today need copious amounts of chemicals and energy. At the Sárvári Research Trust we are producing new Sárpo potatoes bred conventionally over many years. These new varieties look after themselves. Their foliage smothers weeds. They have a unique combination of resistance to virus and late-blight diseases. Sárpos cost less to grow, and their production results in emissions of a lot less greenhouse gas. It is time that the industry woke up to the fact that potatoes can be grown sustainably. Should we really be spraying fields 15 or 20 times a year to control blight?"

Pete Riley, Campaign Director at GM Freeze, an organisation that has been fighting the introduction of GM into our food since 1999, emphasises the significant benefits of the potatoes:

"These varieties provide a viable option for coping with blight without turning to GM substitutes. Plus, they are here now, whereas GM varieties may be years away and are likely to bring with them a new set of contamination problems for the potato industry, which could be very damaging."

Despite the numerous benefits of the Sárpo potatoes, they have yet to be taken up by large commercial growers and supermarkets. The GM industry has publicly dismissed the benefits of this variety, claiming they don't taste good and don't boil well. This has further discouraged the development and support for these much-needed potatoes. This is why The Gaia Foundation, GM Freeze and the Sárvári Research Trust held a tasting event in London to mark the start of a campaign against GM varieties of potato. With a delicious spread of potato dishes including chips, mini jacket potatoes and soup at Oliver Row's restaurant Konstam, the GM free spuds were given a thorough taste test by all in attendance, leaving with 'doggy bags' of potato dishes. The tasting was definitely a success.



The Sárvári potatoes are a step in the right direction for a healthier, more sustainable system of food sovereignty. Liz Hosken of the Gaia Foundation adds:

“GM crops are the extreme result of a food system that is so industrialized it incurs a huge social, ecological and climate debt on the planet. But we already know about the safe and ecological alternatives to GM that offer multiple benefits to farmers, the environment, the climate and consumers. The Sárvári potatoes show us that we don't need GM crops. They demonstrate the importance of moving towards sustainable systems of agriculture, and how easy it can be to get there.”

Background

The Gaia Foundation, GM Freeze and Sárvári Research Trust organised a tasting of the Sárvári potatoes at Oliver Row's Konstam at the Prince Albert restaurant On 18 March 2010. This provided the opportunity to taste these delicious potatoes, learning about them from the Director of the Sárvári Research Trust Dr David Shaw, GM issues from Pete Riley, Campaign Director at GM Freeze and Industrial food systems and food sovereignty from Liz Hosken.

The Sárvári Research Trust is based in North Wales and is responsible for building a new 'race' of potatoes, called Sárpo, with unique and exceptional resistance to late-blight disease. Consequently, they can be grown with low chemical and energy inputs, without the use of GM technology. The Sárpo varieties of potato have a light carbon footprint as a consequence of their dense, reliable growth and blight resistance. They are ideal for organic growers, as well as essential for the environment, as some varieties are drought tolerant, able to be stored in ambient temperatures and grow well in low fertility soils. The Trust requires further support to continue its crucial work, and in order for this to occur a critical mass of seed potatoes must be grown.

For more information about the Sárvári Research Trust contact Dr David Shaw, shaw@sarvari-trust.org. GM potatoes have recently dominated the news and are the most likely GM crops to be grown in the UK. In March 2010 the European Commission announced that BASF's starch altered GM potato had been granted marketing consent, after 12 years of assessment and debate.

The safety of the BASF GM potatoes has been repeatedly questioned by EU member states, because of the presence of an antibiotic resistance master gene (resistance to kanamycin) as part of a GM trait. This presents a health concern, as the antibiotic resistance gene could horizontally transfer to harmful bacteria in the guts of animals, thus making the serious problem of antibiotic resistance in medicine and veterinary medicine even more acute. The European Medicines Authority advised that kanamycin was an important antibiotic and could become more so in the future to deal with resistant strains of diseases such as TB.

However, the EC and their advisers, The European Food Safety Agency, ignored this advice and approval has been granted. Two companies already have equivalent non-GM starch altered potatoes on the market. For more information about GM Freeze contact Pete Riley, pete@gmfreeze.org or 07903 341065.

The Gaia Foundation works with individuals, organisations and networks in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe, to regenerate healthy ecosystems, enhance traditional knowledge and practices for land, seed, food and water sovereignty, and to strengthen community self-governance. This enables communities to become more resilient to climate change and related challenges. For more information, images or interviews contact Victoria Habermehl on Victoria@gaianet.org or 0207 428 0054.



Pete Riley, Liz Hosken, chef Antonio Carluccio and Dr David Shaw at the 18 March event at Konstam.

www.gaiafoundation.org

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