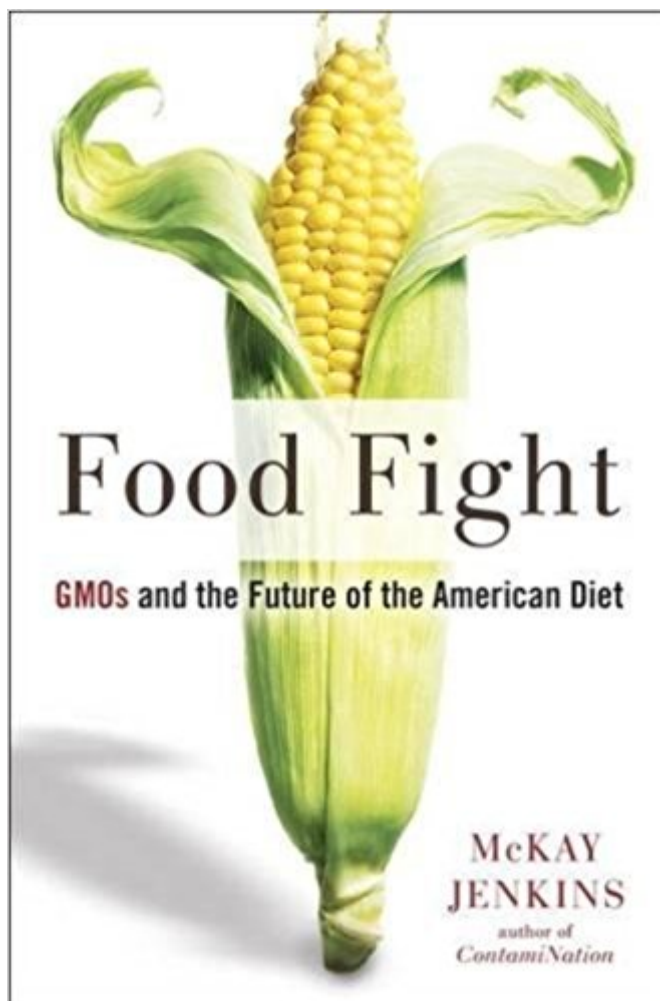


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Food Fight: GMOs And The Future Of The American Diet



Synopsis

Are GMOs really that bad? A prominent environmental journalist takes a fresh look at what they actually mean for our food system and for us. In the past two decades, GMOs have come to dominate the American diet. Advocates hail them as the future of food, an enhanced method of crop breeding that can help feed an ever-increasing global population and adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Critics, meanwhile, call for their banishment, insisting GMOs were designed by overeager scientists and greedy corporations to bolster an industrial food system that forces us to rely on cheap, unhealthy, processed food so they can turn an easy profit. In response, health-conscious brands such as Trader Joe's and Whole Foods have started boasting that they are "GMO-free" and companies like Monsanto have become villains in the eyes of average consumers. Where can we turn for the truth? Are GMOs an astounding scientific breakthrough destined to end world hunger? Or are they simply a way for giant companies to control a problematic food system? Environmental writer McKay Jenkins traveled across the country to answer these questions and discovered that the GMO controversy is more complicated than meets the eye. He interviewed dozens of people on all sides of the debate—scientists hoping to engineer new crops that could provide nutrients to people in the developing world, Hawaiian papaya farmers who credit GMOs with saving their livelihoods, and local farmers in Maryland who are redefining what it means to be "sustainable." The result is a comprehensive, nuanced examination of the state of our food system and a much-needed guide for consumers to help them make more informed choices about what to eat for their next meal.

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Customer Reviews

"Jenkins provides excellent context and analysis for a question we will grapple with for years to come." — Baltimore Magazine — "Impressive research into a complex situation presented in a highly readable form." — Kirkus Reviews — "Highlighting the pros and cons of this contentious topic, Jenkins gives conscientious readers plenty to chew on." — Publishers Weekly — "McKay Jenkins has done the impossible. He has produced a remarkably fair and balanced account of the contentious role of GMOs in the U.S. food supply, calling the shots as he sees them. Pro- and anti-GMO proponents will find plenty to argue with, but anyone wanting to understand what the fights are really about and why they matter will find this book a big help." — Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University and author of *Safe Food: The Politics of Food Safety* — "With crystalline writing and deep, detailed reporting, McKay Jenkins has given the world a view of our food supply — the role of GMO science to transform all we eat and how farmers produce it, and the work of smart people harnessing old traditions to bring good local food to the table. Food Fight shows the abundance of danger and hope in the food we eat and the ways it comes to be." — Richard Preston, author of *The Hot Zone* and *The Wild Trees* — "An insightful and unbiased deep dive into the complex issues that make up the ongoing GMO debate. Many books have been written about the rise of crop biotechnology, but Food Fight gives us a fresh look into both the risks and rewards of this dramatic reshaping of our industrial food system, and illuminates why now more than ever it is critical that we care." — Carey Gillam, investigative journalist formerly of Reuters, and author of a forthcoming book on the Roundup pesticide controversy. — "McKay Jenkins digs beneath the surface of the GMO debate to uncover its root: a three-decade struggle over the future of food and society as a whole." — Liz Carlisle, PhD, author of *Lentil Underground* — "In Food Fight, McKay Jenkins exposes the connection between GMOs and the surging use of herbicides that compromise healthy soil. The only way to heal our water world is to make dirt live. Living soil is a sponge and nature's detox clinic for agricultural chemicals that otherwise run into rivers and create the ocean's dead zones. After a long hard look at the alternatives, Jenkins makes the case that local food production is needed to combat our deteriorating quality of life — a must read for the conscious consumer." — Charles Moore, author of *Plastic Ocean*

McKay Jenkins is the author of seven books, including *ContamiNation*, *The Last Ridge*, and *Bloody Falls of the Coppermine*. The Cornelius Tilghman Professor of English, journalism, and environmental humanities at the University of Delaware, Jenkins lives with his wife and two children in Baltimore.

My hope was that this would be a balanced and fair discussion of all aspects of the many debates about the benefits and dangers of genetic modifications, and I am happy to report it does so well. The only topic on which all sides are not considered is "climate change", which is simply assumed as fact. One of the big takeaways for me was that the problem with genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) is not merely the risk of unintended consequences when changing the makeup of our food, but also the health consequences to us of added pesticides and fungicides in our diet when plants are modified to tolerate them. Another big takeaway was the difference between turning all our agricultural output into only two or three patented foods supplied only by a few huge corporations, versus using GMOs as part of an intentional system of local suppliers of otherwise-natural food, raised without pesticides and synthetic fertilizers. I am now fortunate to live where organic gardening of almost any desired food is easy year-round, versus having previously lived where only corn and beans were visible in area farms. We have a community garden, in which I now grow many of the fruits and vegetables we eat, with little need for pesticides or fertilizer, but huge composters fed daily. Until I read this book I hadn't realized how important that is for our health, and now hope such local fare may become available everywhere, rather than everyone being offered only industrial-scale foods from only a few sources. The book does a great job of pointing out my own main concern with GMOs and how they are raised - namely the intense efforts by those who promote them to reveal nothing about what is being done to make them, no matter how many and how dangerous the chemicals sprayed near innocent and unwarned humans in doing so. If GMOs are as wonderful as proponents claim, and if pesticides used in growing them are so harmless, then why must it be like pulling teeth to learn anything about what is being done and where, and why such a deathly opposition to admitting which products in grocery stores do and don't contain them? I'm also as offended as the author with the notion that even farmers who try to avoid using GMOs can successfully be sued if their fields are nonetheless found to contain GMOs blown in on the wind. It seems to me it should be the other way around, as such fields can no longer be certified as organic, through no fault of their owner. The book also does a great job of illustrating the problem of regulatory capture by industry of the government agencies intended to keep them well regulated,

resulting in government unable to perform its legitimate function of being a fair umpire of free enterprise. The book is full of actual discussions with those for and against various uses of GMOs, putting real and human faces on what is otherwise just an us versus them good versus evil debate in which both sides see themselves as the heroes and the other side as villains. Overall, a great thorough and interesting discussion of all aspects of a very important and timely issue. Highly recommended!

Food Fight is an attempt by journalist and environmental humanities professor McKay Jenkins to answer the central questions most people want to know about GMOs and to inform the reader of GMOs place in the industrial agricultural system and outside of it. If you wonder what the controversy is all about, Jenkins explores the three reasons people oppose GMOs: the pesticide use that accompanies GM seeds and increases because of them, the unknown effects of DNA modification on gene expression and human health, and the socio-economic effects on local and regional agricultural economies. He cannot analyze these topics thoroughly as much of their impact is unknown- but Jenkins tells us what activists and geneticists think about them and why. *Food Fight* is not an attack on GMOs, as the author feels that they have some place in the future of agriculture, but it does criticize the industrial agricultural system and its relationship to GMOs. Jenkins organizes his discussion into three parts. The first, *Roots*, explains a little about GM (genetically modified) technology and the debate over safety. Much of the scientific community considers GMOs to present no more danger than conventionally hybridized foods, while others are wary of unpredictable effects on gene expression and concerned by animal studies that demonstrate different response to GMO foods than conventional equivalents. Jenkins introduces the topic of pesticides and GMO foods, glyphosate in particular. The book's second part, *Seeds*, focuses on Hawaii, a microcosm of the GMO debate. On the Island of Kauai, 14,000 acres constituting more than 1,100 experimental fields are doused with unknown chemicals to test new GM seeds, just next door to homes and schools. Both Maui and the Big Island have seen efforts to limit GMO planting, while the Big Island is home to the Rainbow Papaya, a non-profit GMO success story. The book's third part, *Fruit*, introduces us to another potential GMO product intended to feed the developing world: a cassava engineered to provide more beta carotene and resist viral diseases. And it relates, in brief, the saga of Golden Rice and why it has never made it to market

and why we have lots of GMO corn and soybeans but not wheat. Which brings the discussion to Wes Jackson's Land Institute in Kansas, which has spent decades trying to develop a perennial wheat plant by (non-GM) crossing wild wheatgrass with domesticated wheat. Perennial crops would solve or ameliorate a great many environmental problems with industrial agriculture. Though, it seems, as with the GMOs intended to be sustenance crops in sub-Saharan Africa, there has not been a lot of success. Jenkins ends the book by looking at small-scale industrial farming that mixes conventional, organic, and GM techniques to create sustainable agriculture as well as successful organic farms. In examining GMOs, Jenkins presents the viewpoints of scientists who are working at non-profits to create GMOs that they hope will help feed the developing world, Dennis Gonsalves, whose Rainbow Papaya saved an industry in Hawaii, those who question the safety of GMOs, as well as people like Wes Jackson, who think the GMO debate is a distraction from fundamental problems with modern agriculture. Jenkins does not so much oppose GMOs as he does the industrial agriculture system that uses them to create Roundup Ready (and similar) corn and soybeans destined for junk food and has increased the use of glyphosate 15-fold in the process. "Food Fight" tells us what the GMO debate is about, not what to think about it, as the author has a middle-of-the-road position on GM itself. He doesn't go into depth about the studies done on GM foods in animals or on glyphosate on humans, so the reader must seek those out, but some are cited in the end notes.

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