Strange fruit: Could genetically modified foods offer a solution to the world's food crisis?

- Paul Valleyley The Independent, April 19, 2009
http://www.independent.co.uk

How much do you spend each week on food? It depends on how much you earn, of course. But roughly speaking, the average Briton devotes around 7 to 10 per cent of their income to titillating their taste buds. Yet it's different if you're poor - and very different if you're very poor. If you'd been unlucky enough to be born in parts of Africa, Asia or Latin America you could be spending 50 or even 70 per cent of what you earn each week just on trying to fill your belly.

And that fact could be about to alter what British shoppers are able to put in their supermarket trolleys. For Genetically Modified foods are back on the agenda.

GM foods have been out of the UK shops for almost a decade now, ever since the concentrated tomato paste based on the Flavr Savr(r) modified tomato was taken off the shelves in double-quick time, following campaigns in 1999 by anti-GM protesters and a lot of "Frankenfood" headlines in the popular press. Those were the days of mad cow disease, dioxins in chickens and antifreeze in German wine, when public suspicion of what might be happening to our food was first aroused.

But change is in the air. A few weeks ago the chief executive of Tesco, Sir Terry Leahy, admitted that UK supermarkets may have been too quick to jump on the non-GM bandwagon and signalled Tesco is willing to re-open the debate. The World Bank is calling for a new agricultural revolution, based on biotechnology. The pressure group Sense About Science has launched a major PR initiative with a report entitled "Making Sense of GM".

Even the Pope has given his blessing to a meetin
g of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences - which includes many of the most respected names in 20th-century science - at the Vatican in Rome next month, after it produced a report entitled "Feeding a Hungry World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology". There have also been more Google searches on GM food in the past two years in the UK than anywhere else in the world.

"It feels as if we are being given a second chance to explain the potential of genetic modification and as a society we need to get it right this time," says Professor Chris Lamb, the director of the John Innes Centre, Europe's premier research plant and microbial research institute. "Genetic modification of crops is a safe technology. It has the potential to be a powerful tool for improving the sustainability of agriculture and for helping to provide global food security."

Not everyone agrees. Prince Charles has in recent times repeated his warning that the moving of genes between species and varieties is "guaranteed to cause the biggest disaster environmentally of all time". Organisations like the Soil Association, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth continue to oppose the new technology, along with anti-GM pressure groups such as Genewatch and GM Freeze which has published a series of counterblasts to the pro-GM lobby with titles like "Feeding the World with GM Crops: Myth or Reality?"

And anti-GM activists are still on the alert - last year they sabotaged the only GM trial approved by the British Government in 2008, a project directed by Professor Howard Atkinson from Leeds University who had modified 400 potato plants to make them resistant to nematode worms (which cost the UK potato industry around £50 million a year). It meant that almost all of the 54 GM crop

trials attempted in Britain since 2000 have suffered vandalism of some type.

What has brought about this revival of interest in GM? A concatenation of factors has built up. Last year saw a massive rise in food prices across the world following poor harvests in bread-baskets like Australia. Then came a big rise in the price of oil, from which fertiliser is made and which fuels tractors. Next came speculation on world commodity markets after the loss in confidence provoked by the worldwide recession. All this was against a background of larger swathes of arable land being switched from food t o the production of biofuels.

At the same time increased affluence in China and India has led to increased meat consumption, which means more cereals are demanded for animal feed. On top of that climate change is turning productive land to desert or salt wastes or flooding it. And all the time the world's population grows by an extra 6 million every year.