

ARE YOU READY FOR THE GENETICALLY MODIFIED “FRAKENAPPLE?”¹

Eric Steinman[©]

“A bowl of apples is like a piece of art,” says Tony Freytag, marketing director at Crunch Pak, an apple-processing company. “It’s display. People won’t touch it. But you put out a tray of cut-up apples — that’s food.”² Apples, beyond looking like art and being the symbolic embodiment of the fertile, natural world, are also a hugely popular and profitable “natural” commodity.

But as the above quote implies, cut apples are seen as more inviting and approachable than even the most perfect and flawless apple. This would explain why the cut and packaged apple industry is utterly booming. According to The New York Times, in 2006 “McDonald’s stocked 54 million pounds of pre-sliced apples, to sell with caramel dip or in salads, and this increased visibility boosted enthusiasm for them in school cafeterias and among time-strapped, health-conscious parents nationwide.” Crunch Pak, and the entire pre-sliced apple industry have greatly impacted how apples are sold, packaged, and consumed, and this, in large part, is due to the technological innovation employed to keep apples from browning.

Apples, upon being sliced and exposed to oxygen, naturally begin to discolor, or brown, but companies like Crunch Pak have figured out how to cheat nature by rinsing apples in a combination of calcium and ascorbic acid — vitamin C — to maintain “freshness” and color. This is because a package of beige apple slices, no matter how delicious, will just not sell. While this little preservation method has insured the viability of the apple-processing industry, it has also brought forth other entrepreneurial enterprise — namely the introduction of the genetically modified (GM) apple. A Canadian biotechnology company, Okanagan Specialty Fruits, has asked the United States to approve a genetically modified apple that won’t brown soon after its sliced, saying this improvement could boost sales of apples for snacks, salads and other uses.

The concept is that this biotech development, called the “Arctic” Apple, will improve upon Mother Nature, and will provide greater shelf stability and durability for retailers (no word yet on how this will at all benefit consumers). This would not be the first genetically modified fruit on the market. Back in 1992, the US Department of Agriculture approved a genetically modified tomato that was proven to ripen more slowly, and genetically modified salmon are still working their way through the system, hoping to hit the market as early as 2011.

And domestically produced apples (at least the ones that are conventionally grown) are far from being wholly natural, with lots of cloning, spraying, and tinkering done behind the scenes. Even still, the leap from relatively natural to GM is a hard bite to swallow. “Some people won’t like it just because of what it is,” says Neal Carter, president of the company that developed the apples. “In the end, it’s a great product, no question about it, and people will see the process used to get it had very sound science.”

But Mr. Carter, there seemingly is a lingering question about it, and all GM food products, and this country, along with the European Union (which has all but banned all manner of GM products) remains intensely squeamish about “Frankenfruits” and “Frankenfoods.” Does any of this bother you, or is our general distaste for all things scientifically engineered reveal more

¹ Care2, healthy & green living, November 29, 2010

² Mooallem, J. Twelve Easy Pieces. The New York Times, February 12, 2006.

about our lack of vision and tendency toward reactionary protest, than the waning integrity of our food? Should we just take a bite of the apple and hope for the best, or is this, by chance, the sort of sin that could eject us from our metaphorical garden of Eden?