

FOOD CONSCIOUS

The shopper's GMO guide

[Carol Ness, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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I could hear my mother's voice in my head as I leafed through Andrew Kimbrell's new quick-guide to genetically engineered foods.

"Oh, the government says they're OK. And if they were such a big problem, we'd all be falling down dead by now. They're no different than regular hybrids," she'd say, handing me a pot to wash with a dismissive snort.

Polls have shown that a majority of Americans disagree with her. But many people also have a tough time explaining why, beyond their instinctive or ideological mistrust of this new technology.

I'll admit I've never found the few quick sentences that might open my mother's mind to another view, because the subject is so complicated, involves heavy science and, I suspect, because people aren't falling down dead by the dozen from eating tortilla chips made with GE corn or drinking corn-syrup-laced soda.

That we know of. Yet.

But genetic engineering isn't E. coli, and opponents of GE food -- also known as genetically modified organisms (GMO) -- say problems suggested in some health studies could take years to show up. Meanwhile, we're eating lots of GE foods anyway, whether we know it or not -- especially in processed foods, because corn, soy and canola are the Big 3 GE food crops.

For people like my mother, this may not be a problem. But for many people who know they don't want to eat GE foods, or for whom the jury is still out, it may be.

"Since our government has refused to label these foods, how do we avoid buying and eating these foods?" asks Kimbrell, an attorney who heads the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Food Safety, a vocal opponent of GE foods.

His new book, "Your Right to Know: Genetic Engineering and the Secret Changes in Your Food" (Earth Aware Editions, \$24.95), answers that question. And, remarkably, it accomplishes that in user-friendly, factoidal, fun-with-graphics way.

For conscious eaters, the heart of the book is a 14-page guide to your local supermarket. It tells you which foods are the most likely to contain GE ingredients (chips, snacks and baby formula), which aren't (fruits, vegetables, wheat), and how to read labels for "hidden ingredients" derived from corn, soy or canola (hint: look for high fructose corn syrup, soy lecithin and canola oil).

A passport-size version of the guide, small enough to slide into most pockets or purses, comes along with the book.

"I wanted to give people a usable tool to avoid these foods so they don't feel so helpless," said Kimbrell, who was in San Francisco last week to celebrate the launch of his book at Millennium restaurant and to appear before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeal in a precedent-setting GE alfalfa case.

The book isn't intended to present the pros and cons of GE foods. Kimbrell is 100 percent against the technology and spends a lot of time in court fighting companies like Monsanto, to keep GE crops from spreading. The Center for Food Safety also opposes irradiation and food animal cloning, and has labored to keep industry from weakening federal organic standards.

In fact, Kimbrell is the man who calls the current administration's efforts to protect food safety "Katrina on a plate."

But anyone who has questions about genetically engineered foods, or is confused about the issue, might want to take a look at this book. Kimbrell and his staff lay out the complexities of the case against GE foods in bite-size pieces that manage to be thoroughly researched (220 footnotes!) and easily digestible.

Concerns about human health issues like allergens, toxins and dangerous proteins potentially created as side effects of genetic engineering are aired, as well as the environmental threats.

There are profiles of key players, lists of major food manufacturers and their friendliness to GE foods, and two-page chart worthy of "The L Word" that draws the many links between top U.S. food regulators and Monsanto and other GE food developers.

As Kimbrell told me, nobody -- not the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates food, nor the GE food companies -- has ever declared GE foods to be safe.

"They say they're not proven to be unsafe -- and as an attorney I appreciate that turn of phrase," Kimbrell said.

While more than half of all the corn, cotton, soy and canola grown in the United States is now genetically modified -- most of it so that it can be sprayed with herbicides -- Kimbrell says much of the food supply is GE-free.

"You can get through most of your shopping without buying GE foods -- and this could be at Safeway," he said. "It's much better news than you think."

And he added, a lot of the food that does contain GE ingredients is junk food, or full of high fructose corn syrup.

"You should be avoiding these foods anyway," he said.

The Center for Food Safety continues to push for the labeling of GE foods, both to help consumers who want to avoid them and also for another reason.

A lack of labels makes it difficult to track an increase in allergic reactions or some other pattern of health problems to a genetically engineered ingredient or food, Kimbrell said.

"If you don't have a government agency looking for patterns," he asked, how will the safety of GE foods ever be determined?

Other countries do require labels and are conducting these kinds of studies.

In the meantime, conscious consumers now have a guide.

Before you shop

Here are a few of the tips on shopping to avoid genetically engineered food, if that's your choice, culled from Andrew Kimbrell's "Your Right to Know." If you have any doubts, Kimbrell says, ask the grocer about suppliers. Look for labels that say 100 percent organic or GE-free or GMO-free.

Fruits and vegetables. Almost all are not GE. The exceptions are a few papayas from Hawaii and a tiny amount of fresh corn, zucchini and yellow squash.

Meat and fish. No GE meat or fish are approved for human consumption. But most GE corn and soy is fed to meat animals and farmed fish. So look for wild fish, grass-fed beef and organic meats.

Dairy. Dairy cows aren't genetically engineered but can eat GE grains unless they're organic. A genetically engineered hormone called rbGH or rbST is used in some dairy cows; look for labels that say no hormones were used.

Baby foods. Most formula contains GE ingredients, either soy or milk from cows injected with GE hormones. Some also contain corn syrup. Cereals can contain ingredients like GE soy lecithin.

Canned and frozen foods. Vegetables and fruits packed or frozen without flavorings, additives or corn, soy or canola oil are GE free. Sauces and entrees with lots of ingredients often contain vegetable oil, soy and cornstarch.

Grains and beans. Corn is the only GE grain on the market. Soybeans are the only GE dried beans. So wheat, rice, oats, quinoa and foods made from them, like pasta, are OK. Check ingredient labels for additives like soy lecithin, which can be GE.

Snacks. Most are processed foods that contain ingredients made from corn, canola, soy or cotton. Nuts, seeds and dried fruits are good options. Popcorn is not genetically engineered. Conventional chocolate bars often contain soy lecithin, corn syrup or other like GE ingredients. Organic snacks are GE free, but "natural" ones aren't necessarily.

Beverages. Look for drinks that are 100 percent juice, or sweetened with sugar or honey instead of corn syrup. Beer currently contains no GE ingredients.

Baked goods. Non-organic breads, baked goods and even chocolate chips often contain high fructose corn syrup, soy, or corn, canola or cottonseed oil, all of which can be GE. Look for products made from wheat, oats and rice, with sugar or maple syrup as sweeteners.

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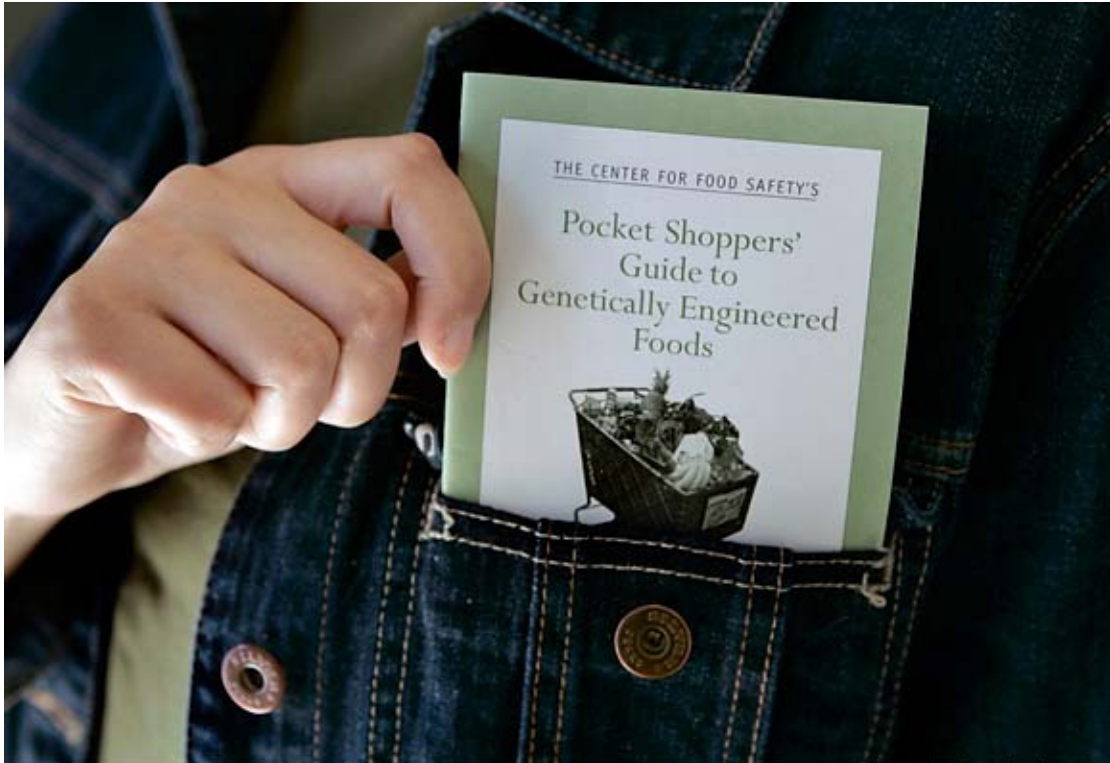
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Pocket size: A shopping guide comes with the book "Your Right to Know" by Andrew Kimbrell of the Center for Food Safety. Chronicle photo by Michael Macor



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Dairy cows aren't genetically engineered but can eat GE grains unless they're organic. A genetically engineered hormone called rbGH or rbST is used in some dairy cows; look for labels that say no hormones were used. Associated Press photo by Sang Tan



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