

Will Britain Learn To Love GM Food?

Contributed by BMRB
 Tuesday, 03 January 2006
 Last Updated Thursday, 24 May 2007

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Of the four major economies measured on the TGI Europa survey Britain is the least negative about genetically modified food products. The French public seem to be the most entrenched in their anti-GM views and have shown little change in them over the past couple of years. In Germany views are also fairly strongly against, but show some evidence of easing in their ferocity recently. In Spain the proportion that is undecided on the subject is similar to that of Britain but there is evidence that, amongst the majority of their population who have now taken a view there is still greater antagonism to GM development than there is in GB.

Movement in Britain towards what might be regarded as a more "European" view is, if anything, very slow. Across the past couple of years of comparable data those who broadly agree that they "would never buy food that has been genetically modified" has shifted by only a percentage point while those who are broadly in disagreement with the proposal have stayed resolutely stable. There is however evidence that people are at least beginning to come off the fence. Strong anti-GM feelings as exhibited by the firmest levels of agreement with the purchasing statement seem to correlate with increasing age "although, this too, seems to be declining. Two years ago those over the age of sixty-five were more than three times more likely to be strongly against the buying of GM foods than were those under twenty. This relationship has now, on the latest TGI data release, slipped closer to two-to-one with the younger end beginning to exhibit greater likelihood of being against purchase of GM food. The question remains as to whether the relatively small surge in anti-feeling amongst the young will be maintained and will, overtime, make up for what will be an inevitable decline in the numbers at the most "conservative" end of the age spectrum. The fact that increasing numbers of younger people are now living away from home in order to attend university means that the younger lifestage groups are being put into positions where such decisions may need to be made "and peer group pressure becomes more possible.

Interestingly examination of the attitude of even younger age groups via Youth TGI's statement "I don't care if I eat GM food" reveals declining antagonism as age increases and, presumably, personal control over food consumption increases. Amongst the adult population, perhaps as a result of differing age profiles but also probably to do with local sensitivities, there are some notable differences in views around the country. The most firmly held anti-GM views appear to be held down in the South West of England. The areas that appear to be most pro are the North West and Wales while those who seem least able to form a view tend to congregate in the far north of England, Yorkshire and Humberside.

Correlation with other related views is also revealing. Those who are most anti-GM are almost four times more likely than average to strongly believe that it is worth paying more for organic food and they are approaching three times more likely to also be willing to pay more for foods that do not contain "artificial additives". They are twice as likely as average to be vegetarian and have an index of 166 against the claim to "only shop at supermarkets that sell good quality fresh food".

Amongst the most strongly held food related views of the least anti GM group are that they like to eat take away meals and that they "like to treat myself to foods that are not good for me".

In terms of actual buying behaviour there is little doubt that attitudes to GM food at least demonstrate high correlation if not influence. Those who are most strongly anti GM are 43% more likely than average to buy fresh poultry from a butcher and 19% above average for buying fresh meat from the same source. Even frozen and pre-prepared or pre-packed meat is more likely to come from the butchers than is the case with the pro GM part of the shopping population. The GM wary are 33% more likely to get their fresh fish from a fishmonger, 38% above average for buying fresh vegetables from the greengrocer and 29% more likely to get fresh fruit from the same source.

Of course there are some major conflicts going on in the minds of the most anti-GM consumers "perhaps, again related to their older than average age profile. They are very strongly pro British in their general purchasing and are amongst the more likely to be counting the pennies and looking for the lowest prices when doing their shopping. Neither of those two drivers always sit comfortably with the purchaser of goods labelled as organic or GM free. Nor does the fact that, in order to differentiate the organic from the non-organic (e.g. bananas), it is usually the former that is pre-packed in order to carry specific labelling and to appear "special". Again, for a group that is also very wary of recycling and what they might regard as wasteful packaging, this might provide another conflict that bars the way to their ability to reflect their views in their actual behaviour.