

‘Modified’: A Film About GMOs and the Corruption of “Food Supply for Profit”

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Parts of the documentary [Modified](#) are spent at the kitchen table. But it's not really a tale about wonderful recipes or the preparation of food. Ultimately, it's a story of capitalism, money and power and how our most basic rights are being eroded by unscrupulous commercial interests.

The film centres on its maker, Aube Giroux, who resides in Nova Scotia, Canada. Her interest in food and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) was inspired by her mother, Jali, who also appears throughout. Aube says that when her parents bought their first house her mother immediately got rid of the lawn and planted a huge garden where she grew all kinds of heirloom vegetables, berries, flowers, legumes and garlic.

“She wanted me and my sister to grow up knowing the story behind the food that we ate, so our backyard was basically our grocery store,” says Aube.

During the film, we are treated not only to various outdoor scenes of the Giroux’s food garden (their ‘grocery store’) but also to Aube and her mother’s passion for preparing homemade culinary delights. The ‘backyard’ is the grocery store and much of Giroux family life revolves around the kitchen and the joy of healthy, nutritious food.

When GMOs first began appearing in food, Aube says that what bothered her mother was that some of the world’s largest chemical companies were patenting these new genetically engineered seeds and controlling the seed market.

In the film, Aube explains,

“Farmers who grow GMOs have to sign technology license agreements promising never to save or replant the patented seeds. My mom didn’t think it was a good idea to allow corporations to engineer and then patent the seeds that we rely on for food. She believed that seeds belong in the hands of people.”

As the GMO issue became prominent, Aube became more interested in the subject. It took her 10 years to complete the film, which is about her personal journey of discovery into the world of GMOs. The film depicts a world that is familiar to many of us; a place where agritech industry science and money talk, politicians and officials are all too eager to listen and the public interest becomes a secondary concern.

Watch the trailer of Modified below.

In 2001, Canada's top scientific body, The Royal Society, released a [scathing report](#) that found major problems with the way GMOs were being regulated. The report made 53 recommendations to the government for fixing the regulatory system and bringing it in line with peer reviewed science and the precautionary principle, which says new technologies should not be approved when there is uncertainty about their long-term safety. To date, only three of these recommendations have been implemented.

Throughout the film, we see Aube making numerous phone calls, unsuccessfully trying to arrange an interview to discuss these issues with Health Canada, the department of the government of Canada that is responsible for national public health.

Meanwhile, various people are interviewed as the story unfolds. We are told about the subverting of regulatory agencies in the US when GMOs first appeared on the scene in the early 1990s: the Food and Drug Administration ignored the warnings of its own scientists, while Monsanto flexed its political muscle to compromise the agency by manoeuvring its own people into positions of influence.

One respondent says,

"We've had a number of people from Monsanto, many from Dupont, who have actually been in top positions at the USDA and the FDA over the last 20 years, making darn sure that when those agencies did come out with any pseudo-regulation, that it was what these industries wanted. The industry will often say these are the most regulated crops in history... I'm not an expert on the law in many other countries. But I am an expert on the laws in the United States and I can tell you... they are virtually unregulated."

Aube takes time to find out about genetic engineering and talks to molecular biologists. She is shown how the process of genetic modification in the lab works. One scientist says,

"In genetics, we have a phrase called pleiotropic effects. It means that there are other effects in the plant that are unintended but are a consequence of what you've done. I wouldn't be surprised if something came up somewhere along the line that we hadn't anticipated that's going to be a problem."

And that's very revealing: if you are altering the genetic core of the national (and global) food supply in a way that would not have occurred without human intervention, you had better be pretty sure about the consequences. Many illnesses can take decades to show up in a population.

This is one reason why Aube Giroux focuses on the need for the mandatory labelling of GM food in Canada. Some 64 countries have already implemented such a policy and most Canadians want GM food to be labelled too. However, across North America labelling has been fiercely resisted by the industry. As the film highlights, it's an industry that has key politicians in its back pocket and has spent millions resisting effective labelling.

In the film, we hear from someone from the agri/biotech industry say that labelling would

send out the wrong message; it would amount to fearmongering; it would confuse the public; it would raise food prices; and you can eat organic if you don't want GMOs. To those involved in the GMO debate and the food movement, these industry talking points are all too familiar.

Signalling the presence of GMOs in food through labelling is about the public's right to know what they are eating. But the film makes clear there are other reasons for labelling too. To ensure that these products are environmentally safe and safe for human health, you need to monitor them in the marketplace. If you have new allergic responses emerging is it a consequence of GMOs? There's no way of telling if there is no labelling. Moreover, the industry knows many would not purchase GM food if people were given any choice on the matter. That's why it has spent so much money and invested so much effort to prevent it.

During the film, we also hear from an Iowa farmer, who says GM is all about patented seeds and money. He says there's incredible wealth and power to be had from gaining ownership of the plants that feed humanity. And it has become a sorry tale for those at the sharp end: farmers are now on a financially lucrative (for industry) chemical-biotech treadmill as problems with the technology and its associated chemicals mount: industry rolls out even stronger chemicals and newer GM traits to overcome the failures of previous roll outs.

But to divert attention from the fact that GM has 'failed to yield' and deliver on industry promises, the film notes that the industry churns out rhetoric, appealing to emotion rather than fact, about saving the world and feeding the hungry to help legitimize the need for GM seeds and associated (health- and environment-damaging) chemical inputs.

In an [interview](#) posted on the film's website, Aube says that genetic engineering is an important technology but "should only take place if the benefits truly outweigh the risks, if rigorous adequate regulatory systems are in place and if full transparency, full disclosure and the precautionary principle are the pillars on which our food policies are based."

Health Canada has always claimed to have had a science-based GMO regulatory system. But the Royal Society's report showed that GMO approvals are based on industry studies that have little scientific merit since they aren't peer reviewed.

For all her attempts, Aube failed to get an interview with Health Canada. Near the end of the film, we see her on the phone to the agency once again. She says,

"Well I guess I find it extremely concerning and puzzling that Health Canada is not willing to speak with me... you guys are our public taxpayer funded agency in this country that regulates GMOs, and so you're accountable to Canadians, and you have a responsibility to answer questions."

Given this lack of response and the agency's overall [track record](#) on GMOs, it is pertinent to ask just whose interests does Health Canada ultimately serve.

When Aube Giroux started this project, it was meant to be a film about food. But she notes that it gradually became a film about democracy: who gets to decide our food policies; is it the people we elect to represent us, or is it corporations and their heavily financed lobbyists?

Aube is a skilful filmmaker and storyteller. She draws the viewer into her life and introduces

us to some inspiring characters, especially her mother, Jali, who passed away during the making of the film. Jali has a key part in the documentary, which had started out as a joint venture between Aube and her mother. By interweaving personal lives with broader political issues, *Modified* becomes a compelling documentary. On one level, it's deeply personal. On another, it is deeply disturbing given what corporations are doing to food without our consent – and often – without our knowledge.

For those who watch the film, especially those coming to the issue for the first time, it should at the very least raise concerns about what is happening to food, why it is happening and what can be done about it. The film might be set in Canada, but the genetic engineering of our food supply by conglomerates with global reach transcends borders and affects us all.

Whether we reside in North America, Europe, India or elsewhere, the push in on to co-opt governments and subvert regulatory bodies by an industry which regards GM as a multi-billion cash cow – regardless of the consequences.

Modified [won the 2019 James Beard Foundation award](#) for best documentary and is currently available on DVD at .modifiedthefilm.com/dvd. It is due to be released on digital streaming platforms this summer.

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