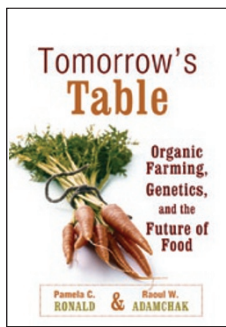


BOOK REVIEW

A timely marriage



Tomorrow's Table: Organic Farming, Genetics, and the Future of Food

by Pamela C Ronald & Raoul W Adamchak

Oxford University Press, 2008
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Reviewed by David McElroy

Having spent most of the past 25 years working in agricultural biotechnology, I cringe each time I find myself trapped in some inextricable situation where a complete stranger asks me what I do for a living. I know that an honest answer to a seemingly innocent question inevitably brings forth an uninvited litany of urban myths, unsubstantiated opinions, technological misconceptions and other half-baked nonsense best left to the pages of *The National Enquirer*. What's worse, the inquisitive stranger will usually expect me to defend my career choice. I can tell you from painful experience that "It pays well," is never a well-received justification.

Once, while having breakfast in Des Moines, Iowa, in the mid-1990s, I tried to head off the issue by telling my waitress that I was a plant breeder—assuming that someone from the Midwest would know what a plant breeder does, and that my answer would discourage further comment. No such luck: the waitress put down her pot of coffee, set down the Marlboro that until then I assumed was superglued to the lower left corner of her mouth, looked me straight in the eye and informed me that if I asked for her opinion plant breeding was simply, "Half genetics...and half heredity!" She then menacingly challenged me to tell her something different. But now comes a book that sets out to provide the general reader with a fair and balanced account of what folks in my line of business actually do, set within the intriguing framework of a discussion between married practitioners around the benefits and issues associated with two supposedly antagonistic trends in modern farming: transgenics and organics.

The authors of *Tomorrow's Table: Organic Farming, Genetics, and the Future of Food* are Pam Ronald, a University of California, Davis, geneticist, who has spent her professional career dissecting disease resistance and flooding tolerance in rice (disclaimer: I've known Ronald for over 20 years including, while at a previous employer, helping to spin out her venture from UC-Davis back when she was a budding tenurepreneur—an academic who mitigates the employ-

ment risk of starting a new company by not giving up their tenured faculty position—and more recently as a scientific advisory board member at Targeted Growth); and Raoul Adamchak, an organic farmer for over 25 years, manager of the certified organic farm on the UC-Davis campus and an inspector and past president of California Certified Organic Farmers, and Ronald's husband. The book successfully integrates the knowledge and insights of a practicing plant geneticist and the practical training of a long-time organic farmer to consider a range of arguments both for and against organic farming and genetic engineering in a manner that is conversational and informative, rather than confrontational or overly biased. Ronald and Adamchak suggest that both approaches to modern farming will contribute significantly towards the sustainable production of food in the future, and argue that the continuing sustainability and productivity in agriculture will benefit from the integration of the most useful aspects of transgenic crops, such as the reduction in the need for crop protection chemicals, the potential reduced water and nitrogen fertilizer requirements of next-generation agronomic trait products, with the more productive of organic farming practices, including a heightened awareness of environmental stewardship issues and a focus, whether real or perceived, on food quality.

Who could argue with this well-reasoned position? Well, as most readers of this publication are aware, some consumers, especially those living in Europe, take exception to transgenic agriculture, viewing genetically modified (GM) crops as unnatural, potentially unsafe to eat, environmentally disruptive or aiding the corporatization of global agriculture. However, I have not had one single European visitor show up at my home with their luggage packed full of enough non-GM foods to support them through their lengthy stay in the United States. On the contrary, they consistently display no hesitation about benefiting from the ample supply of GM-derived foods in my kitchen, all prepared with lavish helpings of GM canola oil, presumably so they can generate the energy needed to stuff their bulging suitcases full of affordable GM cotton goods for the trip back home.

Tomorrow's Table is not just another biology textbook posing as a general reader in a shallow attempt to garner extravagant royalty payments for their academic authors, but one of the best, most balanced accounts of transgenic agriculture that I have read. It will appeal to laypeople, seasoned practitioners and anyone who cares about the future of sustainable farming. It also includes an intimate look into the private lives of the authors, their family and friends—and furthermore, it's also a cookbook! Chapters are generously peppered with details of the elaborate meals the couple assemble on a nightly basis. All of this makes for an even more interesting read. My only regret is that this kind of book wasn't available when I was having breakfast back at *Denny's* in Des Moines, but the good news is that going forward I'll be providing my European visitors with a copy of *Tomorrow's Table* for their flights home.

COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

The authors declare competing financial interests: details accompany the full-text HTML version of the paper at <http://www.nature.com/naturebiotechnology/>

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