

Asheville chef demands GMO labeling at Capitol Hill, White House

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by Kat McReynolds

Asheville chef William Dissen, owner and executive chef at The Market Place, is one of about two dozen chefs invited to gather at Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. on Tuesday, Dec. 2, in support of labeling food containing genetically modified organisms.

Dissen and other renowned chefs, including Tom Colicchio, José Andrés, Art Smith, Andrew Zimmerman and Nora Pouillon, will join Sen. Jon Tester (D – Mont.) to deliver a petition signed by 500 chefs, which “calls on lawmakers to support legislation introduced by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) that would require manufacturers to label food that has been genetically engineered,” according to a press release.

Similarly, Dissen and colleagues aim to dissuade legislators from passing a bill that would prohibit state-specific GE labeling regulations in favor of a federal standard to omit such labeling.

THE DARK ACT

“We want them to vote against a bill coming up that would not allow states to have GMO labeling on products,” says Dissen, clarifying that the chefs will speak to Congress both individually and as a group, “because we want to know what’s going into our food.”

The proposed bill, dubbed the DARK Act (or “Denying Americans the Right to Know”) by labeling advocates, has already been introduced in the House of Representatives and similar legislation is expected to appear before the Senate soon.

Upheaval of the act would not automatically invoke any new labeling initiatives. Rather, defeating the bill would stop federal law from systematically preempting state initiatives and from nullifying existing and pending labeling practices. That includes some 70 labeling bills or ballots introduced across 30 states in 2013 and 2014, according to the Environmental Working Group.

DISSEN’S GMO PERSPECTIVE

“The main focus behind this isn’t necessarily the science,” he says, dispelling the notion that GMO labeling implies a health risk. “It’s that we want transparency in the food that we’re able to purchase in the markets and at the store. ... The FDA would not let something on the shelves if it was going to harm somebody, or if it was toxic.”

Instead of viewing GMO labeling as a modern-day scarlet letter, Dissen hopes it serves as a method of conveying widely sought information. He points out that some public opinion polls, including one by the Mellman Group, assert that 90 percent of American citizens or more favor GMO labeling.

“Many other countries around the globe have had these policies in place forever, and it doesn’t mean that there’s going to be a giant label,” Dissen continues. “It just means that we want truth in labeling.”

“It’s important to how we’re sourcing to feed our customers, but on the home front it’s also important to how we feed our families,” says Dissen, conveying GMO implications beyond the high-end culinary sphere. In

fact, the new father and restaurateur craves transparency at all stages of the supply chain, including information about how his meat was raised and his vegetables grown.

“At The Market Place, my mission is to source as much local food as I can,” says Dissen. “I want to know the raw material so that as I’m adding value to it by cooking it, I know that I’ve got a product that I can stand behind from start to finish.”

ASHEVILLE IN THE CAPITOL

Lobbying trips are nothing new for Dissen, who has already visited the Capitol in support of sustainable seafood initiatives and other food supply issues in past years. He calls this vocal involvement “part of being an Ashevillean — someone that’s really involved in the community.”

“What I’m doing here in Asheville has parlayed up to more of a national level,” adds Dissen, explaining that his restaurant’s sourcing practices mirror healthy community-wide trends. “It’s an amazing opportunity that people are looking at Asheville nationally and saying [we] have a great model for food.”

Despite the Foodtopia moniker and local emphasis on healthy eating options, [Dissen admits that Asheville’s food systems are imperfect.](#)

“I wouldn’t say that we have the problem solved here in Asheville,” he says, “but as a community we’re coming together and we’re promoting good, safe, healthy local food better than a lot of other communities are around the country.”

In addition to lobbying, Dissen and his peers will have a unique opportunity to visit the White House for a private meeting with President Obama’s chef Samuel Kass, who is also active in food policy alongside Michelle Obama. “Who knows?” says Dissen. “Maybe the first lady will step out to speak with us!”