How to Avoid GMOs when Dining Out

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Dining out can be a huge challenge to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and avoiding GMOs. The simplest solution is to eat at an organic restaurant, but that is not always (or rarely) possible depending on where you live.

Some people are much more strict about being non-GMO and organic at home, and give themselves some leeway when eating out. This is a personal decision. There is not enough data for us to calculate just how risky or dangerous this might be to your health (although usually the more processed a GMO is, the less dangerous it is). We know that according to physicians and reports from individuals, some people are very sensitive. They can react to eating GMO food in a single meal. Others do not notice anything.

Whether you allow yourself to eat certain GMOs or even if you’ve accidentally consumed some, my suggestion is not to worry about it. Because worrying can be toxic, GMO food can be toxic, and now you’ve got two to toxins to deal with.

Here is an easy checklist to help you navigate restaurants and choose healthier non-GMO options.

1. **Eat at restaurants that cook from scratch, not fast-food.**

   Fast-food places are the biggest offenders, since processed foods usually have soy and corn derivatives in most items. Higher-end restaurants generally cook from scratch, but do use some prepackaged condiments like ketchup and mayo that contain GMOs.

2. **Avoid GMO Oils.**

   Unfortunately, most restaurants in North America cook with genetically modified oils. Over 90% of soy, corn, cotton (seed), and canola grown here are GMO. So unless the oil explicitly says organic or non-GMO, assume it is genetically engineered. Vegetable oil is usually made from soybean oil, as is margarine.

   I generally call a restaurant in advance and ask them, “What oil do you cook your food with?” If they use a GMO oil, I ask if they can cook my food in, for example, pure olive oil that they might have on hand. You might also be interested in butter, but it may be from cows injected with GM bovine growth hormone or fed GMOs. Some foods don’t use oil at all.

   Fortunately, olive trees or not genetically engineered, so olive oil is not GMO. Unfortunately, many restaurants will blend olive oil with canola oil for economic reasons. If they say they use olive oil, ask if it is pure or a blend. Often the waiter

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or waitress is not aware of the answer and must go back into the kitchen to find out.

Also, be aware that salad dressings and mayonnaise often contain oil that is derived from GMO soy, corn, cottonseed, or canola oil.

If you avoid GMO oils, I find that it is difficult to eat in most Mexican and Chinese food places. Mediterranean restaurants, including Italian, Middle Eastern, and Greek, often use olive oil. Thai restaurants often use GMO oils, but most do not use any oils in their curry dishes. They cook the food in coconut milk. Also, some Thai soups do not use oil. Fish entrees can often be grilled without oil as well.

Deep fried foods like french fries are very difficult to obtain non-GMO because of the oil.

3. **Sweeteners.**

Most sugar in the US comes from GMO sugar beets. To avoid sugar GMO sugar, limit desserts and soft drinks to those made with pure cane sugar or some other sweetener. (Unfortunately, cane sugar is often sprayed with Roundup before harvest.)

Commercial soft drinks and sodas are usually sweetened with high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) or a combination of sugar and HFCS. The corn, of course, will be from GMO sources.

Diet drinks are no better or possibly worse. Aspartame, also called amino sweet, is found in Equal and Nutrasweet. Aspartame is produced from the use of genetically modified organisms, and is linked to serious diseases.

4. **Processed foods and condiments.**

Most processed foods contain GMO ingredients (corn or soy for example). This includes meat substitutes used in veggie burgers and tofu, as well as condiments like ketchup and soy sauce.

Try to avoid processed foods with the oils mentioned above, or with soy and corn derivatives, including: soy flour, soy protein, soy lecithin, textured vegetable protein, corn meal, corn syrup, dextrose, maltodextrin, fructose, citric acid, and lactic acid.

Ask what foods the chef prepares fresh, and choose those items. Check if packaged sauces are used.

5. **GMO meats, fish, eggs, and dairy.**

The bulk of GMO feed crops are fed to animals. This includes corn, soymeal (leftover from processing soybeans into oil), alfalfa hay, and sugar beet pulp (leftover from extracting the juice for sugar). Dried distillers grains with solubles (DDGS), a by-product of the corn-based ethanol industry, are also mixed with feed for animals.

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Farm-raised fish as well as commercial beef, pork, and poultry are fed with GMO feed. Ask if the source is wild caught or pasture-raised. Organic products don’t allow the use of GMO feed.

6. **Apples, potatoes, and other produce.**

Non-browning Arctic® apples and non-bruising White Russet® potatoes, both created with genetic engineering technology, are entering the market with the primary use intended for the pre-packaged and commercial foods sector. The apples are genetically engineered not to turn brown when sliced; the genetically engineered potatoes do not show bruising.

Papaya grown in Hawaii or China may also be genetically modified. A small amount of zucchini and yellow squash are also grown from genetically modified seed. And although more than 90% of the corn in United States is genetically engineered, the percentage of GMO sweet corn, used for corn on the cob and for canned corn, is much less. Edamame may have GMO soy.

No other produce currently on the market is genetically engineered to our knowledge. Not seedless watermelons, not tomatoes, NOTHING else.

7. **Always ask: consumers are the most persuasive activists of all.**

If you plan ahead, you can call or email the restaurant you plan to visit and ask specific questions that will serve two purposes:

* You will (hopefully) get a list of healthy non-GMO eating options;
* By informing the restaurant of your desire to avoid GMOs, you add to the growing base of non-GMO consumers that is steadily persuading suppliers to seek more non-GMO sources.

I know this works from personal experience. I’ve seen several restaurants switch ingredients as soon as they realized they were using unpopular GMOs.

One final word of advice. As you start looking into the ingredients used in your favorite restaurants, you may get disappointed or angry when you realize the extent of GMO contamination. I encourage you to not dump your anger or frustration onto the restaurant staff. Befriend them, educate them, and have patience. The great news is that the tipping point of consumer rejection is underway in the US and we can see a day soon where the supply chain will be rid of GMOs altogether.

Safe eating.

Jeffrey

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