

Plant biotech will improve how we make food - Mr. Said Belhassan

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Plant breeding innovation can help us develop tastier products with improved nutritional values contributing to more diverse and balanced diets, says Mr. Said Belhassan, Vice President Fruit & Vegetables at the Dutch retail Store Albert Heijn.

The retailing sector is changing very rapidly to adapt to consumers' needs. Did consumers' behavior change significantly in the last years?

“Innovation is very important for the fruits and vegetables sector, especially since consumers demand tasty and healthy food that is fresh and produced locally. For example, there are already many new techniques used in the production of fruits and vegetables, such as Vertical Farming, Urban Farming, lettuce grown on water, energy-efficient led lights, etc.”

“In general, the retailing business is always driven by the wishes and the needs of its clients. Therefore, the quality of products is a top priority. Consumers' demands are many: from using less plastics in packaging or less added sugar to an increasing demand in organic soft fruits and avocados. At the moment, our focus is on healthier and ready-to-eat meals.”

At first sight, retail and plant biotech do not appear to have much in common, but is plant biotech important for retailers and consumers?

“Yes. There are several examples: plant biotech could help us make food that contains more vitamins and fibers for the elderly; or it could also prolongate food’s shelf life and thus reduce food waste. Plant biotech can also help us create new products, such as a unique combination of pineapple and strawberry: a healthy and tasty new product.”

“Furthermore, consumers are very different one to another and we need to supply products that are specific to each group. Plant biotech can help us address the needs of very diverse type of consumers (e.g. elderly and millennials).”

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Mr. Said Belhassan - Vice President Fruits & Vegetables at Albert Heijn

Plant biotech offers the chance to improve many characteristics of the food we eat, from enhanced taste to reduced allergenicity. Do you think consumer would be interested in buying allergens-free products?

“For the moment, allergens are not a major issue within the fruit and vegetable sector. The market of allergen-free products is still small, but it might grow in the future.”

What developments in biotech are most interesting for consumers? And how could these features be communicated to the public?

“Albert Heijn defines three priorities in its strategy for fruits and vegetables. The first one is to improve the taste and quality of its products. The second is to improve tracking and traceability systems and, last but not least, to inspire consumers to opt for healthier meals.”

“For Albert Heijn, consumers’ satisfaction and trust are key. If plant breeding provides an added value to our products, it is important that we inform our consumers. According to our policy, we are transparent and strive for a strict control of our products and processes. For example, Albert Heijn organizes open days in farms with the collaboration of farmers. Last month, this operation gathered 80.000 visitors in one weekend.”

Mr. Said Belhassan is Vice President of Fruits, Vegetables, Flowers and Plants at the retail store Albert Heijn, brand of the group Ahold Delhaize. Albert Heijn is the leading food retailer in the Netherlands and has stores in Belgium and Germany.

What is plant breeding?

Plant breeding is the art and science of changing the traits of plants in order to produce desired characteristics to improve the overall function of various plants and crop systems.

With the predicted growth in the global population and the effects of climate change, varieties with increased yields and resistance to drought and disease are critical if we are to provide enough food for future generations. Plant breeding is one of the tools that will help us achieve sustainable crop production in the long term.

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