

Occupy Green/Red Chile

If you missed the opportunity to rally with protesters over corporate greed and economic inequality in the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, here's your chance to join a new movement. Only this time the Occupy Green/Red Chile movement is aimed at protesting the efforts of some New Mexico State University (NSMU) scientists to unravel the genetic mysteries of red and green chiles.



According to a recent Associated Press article, what has pepper purists all heated up is the fear that the scientists will use their knowledge to develop a genetically engineered pepper. It all stems from the fact the culture of New Mexico's iconic vegetable is in decline. Problems with plant diseases, rising labor costs, and competition from lower-priced imported peppers have led to a 75 percent decline in the acreage devoted to growing chiles in the state in the last twenty years.

Traditional plant breeding techniques have long been used in the quest to produce chile pepper plants that are disease resistant, flavorful, and easy to harvest. The newer process of genetic engineering, which involves inserting genes from unrelated species into a plant's genome to add desirable traits, has been used in crops such as corn, soy, and potatoes. But according to Professor Paul Bosland, director of the NSMU Chile Pepper Institute, this process has not proved successful with peppers, and NSMU scientists are simply trying to understand why it doesn't work, not trying to breed or create genetically modified(GM) chiles.

But the issue of genetically modified organisms is a charged one and passions run high. So just the possibility of a GM chile has some folks hotter than a jalapeno. They are concerned that the lack of labeling of genetically modified foods leaves consumers who wish to avoid them unprotected, and that small growers could face possible patent infringement lawsuits if their crops become inadvertently cross-contaminated with a genetically engineered variety. There is also concern that an important part of New Mexico's cultural heritage could be lost if GM chiles are developed.

Occupy Red/Green Chile protesters are planning marches, circulating petitions, and using social media to connect with supporters. They may be hoping to keep to traditional paths in plant breeding, but they are up-to-the-minute with their own Facebook page!