



14 November 2013

Competition Launch to ‘Brand’ Synthetic Biology Vanilla

ETC Group and Friends of the Earth are launching a public design and branding competition to shine a spotlight on synthetic biology (extreme genetic engineering) in our food. Use your creativity to help us expose the very un-natural new ingredient coming to a confection near you, and what it means for vanilla farmers.

More information and entry form at <http://www.etcgroup.org/vanilla-competition>

As early as next year, a new ingredient straight out of a petri dish could enter our favorite foods – from ice cream to apple pie. It’s a ‘[vanilla-like’ flavor](#) produced via a new extreme genetic engineering technology called ‘[synthetic biology.](#)’ No government anywhere in the world has taken steps to assess or regulate this technology, yet its imminent arrival on the commercial market may threaten the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of tropical vanilla farmers and their families in countries such as Madagascar and Mexico.

This new vanilla flavor exists nowhere in nature, but the companies behind it are confident it deserves a ‘natural flavor’ label. [ETC Group](#) and [Friends of the Earth](#) believe that would be misleading and that consumers need to know the real story behind this novel, genetically engineered ingredient.

While the companies don’t want to draw attention to the vast distance between vanilla that grows in a pod and a vanilla-like substance produced by engineered microbes in a stainless steel tank, we think it deserves a name of its own. We tossed around a few possibilities: *Vat-nilla? Frankenilla? Syn-illa?* We want to hear your ideas.

So we are launching a competition.

It’s time to get creative. We are calling all designers, artists, activists, consumer advocates and anyone with a good idea to help us brand the new synthetic biology vanilla-like flavor. What do *you* think it should be called? Tell us its name. Design a logo, a label or a catchy advertisement! A panel of judges will vote on the best names and designs and give away fantastic prizes derived from real, natural vanilla.

How to participate in the competition:

Read about the new, synthetic biology vanilla-like flavor (see below) and submit your ideas at the form below. If you need some inspiration to get the creative juices flowing, check out our [online competition gallery](#). Submissions will be accepted until February 1st, 2014.

Judges: Distinguished experts from natural foods marketing, arts, advertising and the global food movement have agreed to help judge submissions.

Atziri Carranza – Artist (Mexico)

Claire Pentecost – Artist and Professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (USA)

Ed Gillespie – Founder of Futerra Sustainability Communications (UK)

Germán Rodríguez – Farmer, advocate for Ejido Primero de Mayo, indigenous vanilla producers' organization (Mexico)

Melody Meyer – Vice President, United Natural Foods and Chair of the Organic Trade Association (USA)

Nnimmo Bassey – Environmentalist, Poet, President, [Health of Mother Earth Foundation](#) (Nigeria)

Patricia Rain, 'The Vanilla Queen' – Author and Expert on Vanilla (USA)

Vandana Shiva – Environmentalist, Activist, Founder of Navdanya (India)

Prizes!

The winners will receive a basket of all-natural vanilla-themed goodies. Selected winning entries will also be displayed at a special exhibition about Synthetic Biology and Vanilla to be held in Veracruz, Mexico in 2014 – the indigenous home of vanilla growing.

Messaging tips for the competition

- This Synthetic Biology vanilla is not natural and should more accurately be communicated as synthetic, artificial, human-made.
- Calling it natural vanilla is fooling consumers.
- Calling it natural vanilla may threaten farmers' livelihoods and rainforests.
- No government in the world has yet established the means for assessment and oversight of synthetic biology products – not even in food and personal care consumer products.

How to submit your designs and proposals:

You can submit any graphic design as a digital file (for example, .jpg, .tiff, .bmp, .gif) by uploading it at <http://www.etcgroup.org/vanilla-competition>, or email your design to etc@etcgroup.org with the subject line: **Vanilla Competition**.

Entries will be posted to an online gallery, once they have been reviewed to ensure they are appropriate for the Internet. We welcome submissions from all ages and all countries. If you have more than one good idea, send them all. By uploading your design, you agree to have it displayed on ETC Group's website and you agree to allow ETC Group and Friends of the Earth to use the design in our campaign to stop the commercialization of synthetic biology vanilla, which may include republishing the design in different media. The artist will always be credited.

What is Synthetic Biology Vanilla?

Synthetic biology is an extreme form of genetic engineering that is rapidly becoming the new biotech frontier of creating artificial life. Unlike decades-old genetic engineering, synthetic biology does not depend on new combinations of naturally occurring DNA. The near-market synthetic biology vanilla-flavor is made when a new synthetically constructed genetic code (that includes altered copies of human genes) is typed into a computer, printed out from a DNA printer and inserted into yeast. Through a fermentation process, the synthetically engineered yeast then biosynthesize vanillin and other compounds found in vanilla flavor. This is done in industrial vats of sugar.

Synthetic or 'Natural'? Fooling consumers and hurting farmers

Even though the near-market vanilla-flavor is made from synthetically engineered microbes that would never exist in nature, the Swiss company that engineered the yeast, Evolva, and its partner, International Flavors and Fragrances (IFF), argue their product is a result of natural processes and should therefore be considered natural. Some national food laws that classify conventional fermentation techniques as natural processes may indeed allow a 'natural' label, even though Evolva's process involves extreme genetically engineered organisms.

While the companies have insisted that their commercial interest is limited to biting into the market for synthetic and artificial vanilla flavoring (derived from petrochemicals and other materials), other company statements contradict that claim by stressing that the natural label is all-important and ['the key driver.'](#) Intent aside, a 'natural' label would inevitably put Evolva's synthetic biology vanilla flavor in direct competition with natural vanilla derived from the fruit of vanilla orchids, which depend upon intact tropical ecosystems and labor-intensive harvesting. Each flower is hand-pollinated, and the seed pods are harvested, sorted and cured by hundreds of thousands of small farmers in tropical countries such as Madagascar, Comoros, Réunion and Mexico. If the price or demand for natural vanilla production is negatively impacted by the introduction of Evolva and IFF's synthetic biology vanilla, then these farmers and their families, as well as the rainforests they protect, will bear the brunt of the market failure.

For more background on Evolva and IFF's Synthetic Biology vanilla flavor:

- **Friends of the Earth's briefing:** ["Synthetic Biology Vanillin: Not natural, not sustainable, not likely to be labeled and coming to an ice cream cone near you"](#)
- **ETC Group's briefing:** ["Synthetic Biology and Vanilla: A Case Study"](#)
- **New York Times:** ["What's That Smell?, Exotic Scents made from Re-engineered Yeast"](#)
- **Washington Post:** ["Companies Rush to Build Biofactories for Medicines, Flavorings and Fuel"](#)
- **Organic Matters Blog:** ["Synthetic Biology - the next generation of genetic engineering"](#)