

THE AGONY AND ECSTASY OF A MAYO MESSIAH

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

HAMPTON CREEK CEO JOSH TETRICK DOESN'T WANT TO DWELL ON BAD PRESS. INSTEAD, HE'D PREFER TO DREAM OF A BETTER TOMORROW.

It's a sunny morning in September, and Josh Tetrick wants to talk about his new puppy. His last dog, an eight-and-a-half-year-old golden retriever named Jake, recently died of cancer. "It was so awful," Tetrick says. "That's, like, the first time I've ever really experienced death." So he got a new golden retriever, which he decided to name Elie. "There's a book I love called *Night*, written by this guy Elie Wiesel," he says, referring to the Romanian Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize-winning author. You named your dog after Elie Wiesel? I ask him. "Yeah," he says. "He passed away six months ago or something, so yeah."

If the irony of naming one's golden retriever (possibly the dog world's Waspiest breed, and not exactly renowned for its intelligence) after one of modern literature's great Jewish moralists is lost on Tetrick, well, welcome to Josh Tetrick. This is a guy who, seemingly overnight, raked in hundreds of millions of dollars in investment by promising to change the world through vegan mayonnaise, a product that had been on the market for years before his company, Hampton Creek Foods, came along to claim it. For Tetrick, fake mayo is not so much a lowly condiment as a gateway into a better tomorrow of clean eating, humane farms, and enlightened sustainability practices. When he gazes deeply into your eyes and tells you, in his blackstrap molasses Alabama drawl, that he is here on a mission, it is easy to nod along in rapturous belief. If he doesn't perceive irony, it's because

his confidence in his vision (or perhaps strategically placed blinders) doesn't leave any room for it. "I want us to do something that extends way beyond our lives," he says.

We're sitting in Hampton Creek's Mission headquarters, a former chocolate factory whose 90,000 square feet are now devoted to the dissemination of plant-based foods—products, like Hampton Creek's signature ersatz mayonnaise, Just Mayo, that embody, in company parlance, "what it looks like to start over in our food system." The area where we sit looks like a Hollywood simulacrum of a tech company: Millennials cluster around communal desks, pecking at laptops; small dogs roam freely over the poured-concrete floors; the National plays from unseen speakers. Just over Tetrick's shoulder, there's a robotics lab that screens plant samples for the company's database. Just over my shoulder, there's a test kitchen where seven chefs spend their days experimenting with ways to make plants behave like eggs.

This vision of a utopian techno-corpora-

tion, which Tetrick began building six years ago this month and which now counts 150 employees, has of late been the subject of considerable scrutiny, by both the media and the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. In August 2015, an article in *Business Insider* quoted unnamed former Hampton Creek employees who charged that Tetrick and his company were guilty of numerous questionable practices, including exaggerating Hampton Creek's scientific discoveries and the number of plant species in its database (which it currently tallies at 1,000); mislabeling ingredients; surreptitiously and unfavorably changing the terms of employee severance packages; insufficiently testing products; and, in the biggest burn of all, being a "food company masquerading as a tech company." Even the dearly departed Jake came in for criticism: Tetrick's dog was



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allowed in the food lab, the story alleged, and was known to eat cookie dough being used for shelf life experiments.

This past August, *Bloomberg Businessweek* picked up the baton, publishing an investigation that alleged that, beginning in 2014, Hampton Creek had engaged in a large-scale stealth campaign to buy back jars of Just Mayo from store shelves to make it appear more popular than it actually was. While Tetrick insisted that the buyback program was launched for quality-control purposes and had cost the company only \$77,000—“We spend more money on snacks,” he later told CNBC—*Bloomberg’s* sources and documentation said otherwise. The story spurred not only an SEC inquiry into Hampton Creek’s business practices, but also a Justice Department criminal investigation into whether the buyback program constituted fraud. Whether Hampton Creek will face any ramifications is unclear (both the SEC and Tetrick declined to comment on the matter, and the DOJ did not respond to requests for comment). A week after Tetrick and I meet, *Bloomberg* will publish another story: In addition to asserting that Hampton Creek’s buyback program actually cost the company \$1.4 million during a five-month period in 2014 (compared with \$1.9 million in net sales over the same stretch), this one alleges that Tetrick deceived investors about the company’s sales projections, embellished certain parts of his biography, and, on top of every-

thing else, cheated on his then girlfriend with one of his employees.

All of this has been a rather stunning turn for Tetrick, who for the first four years of his company’s life was regarded by the media and Silicon Valley investors as a sort of swashbuckling mayonnaise messiah. His story was palatable and his delivery was smooth: Raised on food stamps in Birmingham, he grew up loving chicken nuggets and Hungry-Man dinners and in high school and college cared mainly about playing football, until a change of heart led him to embark on a different path. After graduating from Cornell University and the University of Michigan Law School, he traveled to Africa on the Fulbright program and spent a few years working with homeless children. Upon returning to the States, he became dedicated to veganism and animal welfare at the encouragement of his best friend, Josh Balk, then a Humane Society of the United States policy director who had been working with corporations to increase their usage of cruelty-free eggs. He and Balk cofounded Hampton Creek with the goal of eliminating the eggs of battery-caged hens from the food supply; their maiden product, Just Mayo, replaced eggs with protein from the Canadian yellow pea.

Although egg-free mayonnaise wasn’t a remotely new idea—Follow Your Heart began making Vegenaize

ENDOWED WITH THE UNCOMPLICATED GOOD LOOKS OF A HANES T-SHIRT MODEL, TETRICK WAS A FRESH, AUTHENTIC, COMPELLING FIGURE, A VEGAN IN BRO’S CLOTHING WHO KNEW HOW TO APPEAL TO THE MAINSTREAM.

in the 1970s and debuted a pea-protein-based version in October 2010—investors ate up Tetrick’s vision of food system disruption, along with his framing of Hampton Creek as a nimble tech company that could out-innovate lumbering food conglomerates. Within months of its founding, Hampton Creek reportedly won a \$500,000 cash infusion from the billionaire venture capitalist Vinod Khosla; it has since sucked up \$120 million in investment from the likes of Marc Benioff, Peter Thiel, and Li Ka-Shing, one of the richest men in Asia. Writing on his website *Gates Notes* in 2013, Bill Gates gave Hampton Creek the equivalent of the pope’s blessing, anointing it as a company helping to shape the future of food.

If disrupting the food industry was an irresistible idea to Silicon Valley—between 2012 and 2014, when Hampton Creek was getting started, investment in food tech climbed steadily, peaking at \$5.6 billion in 2015—then Tetrick, who is now 36, made an ideal evangelist for the cause. Endowed with the uncomplicated good looks of a Hanes T-shirt model and an ingratiating tendency to drop f-bombs into conversations with reporters, he was a fresh, authentic, and compelling figure, a vegan in bro’s clothing who knew how to appeal to the mainstream. Hampton Creek’s target audience, he repeatedly told the press, was not “tree-hugging liberals in San Francisco” but big food-service companies and folks like his cost-conscious, Twinkies-eating daddy back home in Alabama.

Before the onslaught of skeptical press, Tetrick’s most notable tangles were with Big Food. There was the 2014 lawsuit filed (and dropped a month later) by Unilever in which the maker of Hellmann’s (called Best Foods in California) argued that because Just Mayo did not meet the FDA’s legal definition of mayonnaise, it created “unfair competition” with Hellmann’s and “caused consumer deception and serious, irreparable harm to Unilever” and the larger mayonnaise industry. Then there was the letter the FDA sent to Hampton Creek in August 2015 claiming that Just Mayo was “misbranded” because it didn’t contain eggs, a charge that led Hampton Creek to slightly alter its label. And then there was the business with the American Egg Board: In October 2015, a Freedom of Information Act request by a third party revealed that members of the agency, which is run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, had schemed to keep Just Mayo out of Whole Foods and had even joked about putting a hit out on Tetrick. Taken together, the skirmishes added up to an enormous victory for Tetrick, who now looked like a plucky David who had repeatedly foiled Goliath. Earlier this year, he cemented his iconoclast image by purchasing (with his own money, he claims) a series of full-page advertisements

CEO Josh Tetrick addresses employees at Hampton Creek’s headquarters.



COURTESY OF HAMPTON CREEK

in the *New York Times* criticizing Donald Trump; in an interview with *Fortune* magazine, he cited an Elie Wiesel quote about indifference and moral obligation as a reason for taking out the ads.

If you want to see the Tetrick mystique in action, you can watch a YouTube video of him giving a talk at the TEDxEdmonton conference in 2013. “What does it really look like to feed 7.1 billion people?” he asks the audience repeatedly. Striding back and forth across the stage, he’s a bit reminiscent of the motivational speaker Tom Cruise plays in *Magnolia*, all booming voice and boo-ya passion. Watching it, I remember what a former colleague of Tetrick’s told me about seeing him present to potential investors: “It was incredible to watch; it was like being at a Baptist church,” he said. “I’ve always told people that if there’s anyone I’ve ever met who could get elected president, it’s him. I’m not saying that in a necessarily complimentary way, but he has a way. He’s very good.”

When we meet at Hampton Creek’s Folsom Street headquarters, where the company relocated in December 2015 from its original office

in SoMa, Tetrick projects the smooth sincerity of a well-oiled salesman. He’s happy to talk about his company and explain away the *Bloomberg* buyback allegations, which, he says, were the result of a “miscommunication” stemming from the quality-assurance and control spreadsheets the company had provided the *Bloomberg* reporters. They’re a “very small percentage of the records we have,” he says, then reiterates that the buybacks were spurred solely by faulty jars of Just Mayo—but they were also, he allows, a way “to see if we could get a bit of sales momentum, particularly when we hit Safeway.”

When I press him, saying that a product buyback program doesn’t really jibe with the practices of most normal companies, Tetrick pauses and summons a photo onto the big screen affixed to the wall next to where we sit. It shows him with about 15 other people. “That’s about what the team looked like when we launched our first product,” he says. “Five of those are interns. Zero are members of an operations team. You say ‘normal’ companies. If normal companies count as Kraft and General Mills and Unilever, of course they don’t do that. They don’t do 99 percent of what we do in a way, too.”



Inside the Hampton Creek test kitchen, where eggless cookies are among several products that have been developed.

And what Hampton Creek is still on track to do, Tetrick insists, is big. Thanks to its relatively new robotics program, the company can now screen plant cultivars for desirable proteins 24 hours a day, freeing the research and development team to direct its energies toward analyzing how those plants can function like animal

proteins. To those who question the company’s scientific bona fides, he offers the name of Jim Flatt, the former chief technology officer of the synthetic biology company Synthetic Genomics, who was hired in August 2015 as Hampton Creek’s chief technology officer. To those who question the company’s profitability, he says that it recently had its first \$8 million month in sales. (Although he offers to have Jessica Elkus, Hampton Creek’s director of com-

munications, send me specific growth metrics, Elkus later tells me that the company doesn’t share revenue figures.) And to those who question exactly how processed foods like mayonnaise, ranch dressing, and cookie dough—no matter how plant-based—are changing the world for the better, well, Tetrick says, he’s selling food for the world we live in today, not the world it would be better to live in.

“People are using a lot of mayo and eating a lot of cookies and eating a lot of dressings,” he says. “If we can make products that millions of people are eating better, in a way that’s measurable, then that’s having an impact. Is our ranch dressing as good as kale? Of course not! Is our sriracha mayo as good for you as asparagus? Of course not!” But they’re still better than their



alternatives, he says, and better than waiting around until they can be exponentially better, because “we might all be dead by then.”

But, Tetrick adds, eggless mayo is not the point. His company’s first and biggest product is merely a stepping stone on the way to a greater destination. In Hampton Creek’s future he sees pasta, ice cream, yogurt, grains, and cheese; a global presence through e-commerce; shelf space in every single Walmart in the United States and Mexico; and a presence in food service around the world. He sees sharing Hampton Creek’s “discovery platform” with other companies, providing base formulations “to make it easy for [them] to do the right thing.”

The goal, the “dogma,” Tetrick says, “is we want to use the food system to have more impact than any other company in the next two decades.

'Impact' is defined by less water, less greenhouse gas emissions, less suffering, better health habits." But plants aren't necessarily the way forward. "We believe in the plant-based approach, we believe in our discovery platform, but that's not to say it's the only path," Tetrick says. There are other technologies out there, like cellular agriculture, and while he won't say that Hampton Creek is planning to grow meat in petri dishes, he does allow that it's something "that we always have our eyes open to."

Tetrick is more comfortable saying that he doesn't want Hampton Creek to be a "slightly better version of Annie's." Annie's Homegrown, the Berkeley-based organic processed foods company that went public before being bought by General Mills in 2014 for \$820 million, is fine, he says. But he doesn't want to go public, and he doesn't want to be swallowed whole by Big Food. If he did, his corporate masters would force him to do things he's loath to do, like cut R&D, raise prices, and focus on a few core products. "We'd be a good company," he says. "And I have a lot of anxiety about just being a good company." What he'd prefer to do, he adds, is "to try to change the whole thing."

A few weeks after our first interview, I return to Hampton Creek to taste some products and talk to a few employees. In the interim, I approached some former staffers over LinkedIn. Although they didn't reply, they did, apparently, notify Elkus, who then called me to inquire what direction my story was taking. As much as Tetrick and his allies downplay the impact of the recent press, they do betray a certain frustration. In their telling, those stories focused solely on insignificant details instead of the more meaningful efforts the company is making. Josh Parolin, who spent two years with Hampton Creek as a web development lead before leaving to start his own business in March, says he's "waiting for the [story] that dives deep into the company and actually discovers the people underneath." And Vinod Khosla emails me to say that "recent press coverage doesn't impact my views at all. There are half a dozen other things I worry about much more, not the stories planted by sour ex-employees or industry enemies."

Everyone I speak to at Hampton Creek (now with Elkus accompanying me) wants to talk about what they believe really matters, namely the company's mission, and they aren't shy about hauling out heavy artillery to express their feelings. As I sit in the test kitchen eating flavored Just Mayo and deep-fried jalapeño poppers made by a former French Laundry cook (Hampton Creek likes to tout its fleet of Michelin-starred chefs), Chris Jones, the company's vice president of product development, tells me about his five-and-a-half-year-old

daughter, whose photo adorns a nearby mixer. "Every day I go home and I tuck my little one into bed," he says. "That's my inspiration. I want to leave the world better than I received it. For her."

Jones has me try Hampton Creek's cassava porridge, one of the new micronutrient-rich products the company plans to distribute to malnourished children around the world. Although "we're pretty far away from any type of real launch," Jones says, the porridge, which is part of Hampton Creek's so-called Hidden Hunger project, could theoretically be replicated using a country's staple crops. Cassava, for example, is local to Liberia, which is where the company plans to first distribute the porridge. "This could have major implications for a lot of people, more than mayonnaise, perhaps," Jones says. He hopes that "sooner than later," people won't think of Hampton Creek in terms of mayonnaise. The idea, he says, echoing his boss (whom he calls "an amazing leader"), is for people to think of it "as a company that's actually going to change the world."

Cassava porridge is just one of many products that will be in development in the near future, according to the company. Flatt says that his team is looking at a number of food categories unrelated to eggs. "It's very important to know we're not about developing Just Mayo or even replacing the egg, but rather that the egg was a good place to start," he says. His team's current efforts are "about expanding the universe of possibilities," although since patents are pending, he can't be more specific about what those possibilities entail.

In the meantime, Tetrick has other possibilities to entertain. He's in a committed relationship and is about to move in to a house he just bought, though he can't remember where it is until Elkus, who is engaged to Tetrick's brother, Jordan, reminds him that it's near Buena Vista Park. And he recently closed Hampton Creek's latest investment round, which he claims will grant his company unicorn status. But while being valued at a reported \$1.1 billion is "a nice little thing," it "doesn't have a lot of meaning," Tetrick says. His tone is impeccable, at once self-effacing and conspiratorial.

What really matters, he continues, shifting into TEDx mode, is sustainability and health, building a better world and better consumer relationships, and recruiting "fucking awesome" employees. "I think it's important for us to always tell the truth about stuff," Tetrick says, "and always remember why we're doing things." The focus needs to stay on doing good research, building products that people want, and ideally turning a profit on them. Do all that, he says, and Hampton Creek will find its way "through the Unilever thing, the Egg Board thing, the FDA thing, the spreadsheet thing, through all of it. Then"—he waves his hand and smiles—"this too shall pass." ■

A GIRL, A RADIO FLYER, SOME AEROSPACE ENGINEERING, AND A DREAM

THE OUT-OF-NOWHERE SUCCESS STORY OF SMITTEN ICE CREAM.

BY CAITLIN HARRINGTON



AUDREY MA