

Helping millets get their mojo back

Through workshops, meet-ups, food festivals and more, some nonprofits and chefs are trying to make cooking with millets more accessible



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amid listings of business meetings, comedy shows, and online singing lessons, a peculiar workshop is listed on event management platform Townscript. Named 'Get Millet Savvy', it promises to teach participants about the types of millets, recipes that use them, and how to consume them as part of everyday meals. Tickets for the 21-day workshop are priced at over Rs 4,000, and the lessons are conducted online.

It is one of the many workshops, meet-ups and food festivals centred around demystifying the use of millets. Despite India having a tradition of eating millets, the green revolution shifted focus to rice and wheat. Consequently, millet share in total cereal intake in the country has declined from 25% at the beginning of the green revolution to less than six percent in recent years.

However, now these hardy crops find themselves in the spotlight again. The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets. In line with the push, the Indian government has introduced it in mid-day meal schemes, hospital canteens and events. States such as Odisha and Telangana have also announced millet missions in recent years.

Yet, despite the noise around it, the consumption of the same has been confined to a small urban niche. For one thing, they can

be tricky to cook, plus they take longer. Not just individuals, this has been a hindrance for implementing large-scale government programs as well. Bindu Mohanty, who is part of the Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network, which is pushing for the inclusion of millets in the public food distribution systems across the country, says there has been resistance. "The anganwadi workers, who are already very hard pressed for time, wanted easy-to-cook recipes. To inculcate behavioural change in children, the food items also needed to be tasty," she adds.

In order to make it more accessible, the network has organised workshops, food festivals and outreach programs to come up with recipes which are nourishing, but easy to cook.

The reason for this hesitation is that most people try to use millets as substitutes for rice and wheat. However, they are denser and lack gluten — which ties dough together — and cannot be cooked in the same manner. One way to get around this is to mix them with other grains like wheat. Moreover, not all millets are the same. In India itself, more than 200 different types of millets are grown, depending on differing water availability and climatic conditions. Some like ragi have a nutty flavour and taste good in everything from brownies to dosas but not every millet lends itself to such experiments.

"As we were suggesting that people take up millets, we realised they don't know

how to cook them", says Komal Shah of SHARAN, who conducts the Get Millets Savvy workshop. SHARAN is an acronym for Sanctuary for Health And Reconnection to Animals and Nature, an organisation dedicated to spreading awareness about an ecologically sustainable, compassionate lifestyle. They've conducted eight batches of the workshop so far.

Vasundhara Khandare, 58, has been one of the many participants. "It is not easy to make these changes at an old age, but having a community helped in bringing down the hesitation that I had," says the Delhi-based homemaker. Among the tips she has picked up is soaking the grains beforehand and kneading the dough with hot water. She has tried out over 40 recipes, ranging from breakfast items to desserts. There was also a WhatsApp group to help her with queries.

Millets are good not just for one's health but also for the planet. They consume 70% less water than rice, and grow in half the time of wheat. Being a rain-fed crop, growing it needs minimal use of fertilisers. They are also less vulnerable to insect attack, and their seeds can be stored for years, a key benefit in drought-prone areas.

It is with this message in mind that Locavore, a platform dedicated to food, and Rainmatter Foundation, a Bengaluru-based nonprofit, have launched the Millet Revival Project. The project aims to not only help consumers eat more millet, but also help them understand what this means for their bodies, the farmers who grow it, and the

environment around them. It also seeks to study and document the diversity of millets across different regions in India.

"We realised that there is going to be a lot of clutter around millets this year, making it hard for consumers to distinguish credible information and assimilate it," says chef Thomas Zacharias, founder of Locavore. Zacharias points out that the awareness needs to be increased even among the health-conscious. "A lot of our food has gotten homogenised. For example, as a health fad, quinoa has become more popular than millets in India."

The project has been divided into phases. In the first phase, which will last till May, the focus will be on creating a millet cooking lab, a team of climate and policy researchers and an open repository of recipes and stories. A cookbook, a food festival, and meet-ups are also planned. For the



THOMAS ZACHARIAS
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first millet meet-up which will take place in March in Mumbai, the team is collaborating with a Pune-based micro-brewery. The collaboration is a part of long-term partnership, which will tell people

how to brew millet beers.

Such meet-ups are going to be crucial in connecting local communities, students, farmers, and consumers with restaurant and cafe owners, the chef says. Cooking together and having conversations around food memories and recipes are going to play a central role too. "The idea is to make the shift more long-lasting, otherwise people try it for a while, and get back to their old food habits," he adds.

KNOW YOUR MILLETS



Millet	Benefits	Uses
Pearl millet aka bajra	Reduces cholesterol, aids weight loss	Khichdi, roti, upma, idli, paratha
Finger millet aka ragi	Helps reduce blood glucose levels, rich in calcium	Roti, dosas, cheelas, upma, cookies, cakes, porridge
Amaranth aka ramdana	Rich in calcium	Flour, tikkis, salads, laddoos, cupcakes
Buckwheat millet aka kuttu	Rich in potassium, magnesium, folate & calcium	Khichdi, chapati, dosa, poori, sandwich, halwa, cutlets
Barnyard millet aka sanwa	Rich source of fibre	Porridges, upma, dosa, payasam, pulao
Foxtail millet aka kangni	Good for cardiac health, skin & hair growth	Dosas, cheelas, pancakes, breads
Kodo millet aka varagu	High fibre, rich in niacin	Idli, cheela, khichdi