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Powerhouse on your plate!

SHONALI MUTHALALY



RECIPE TO GOOD HEALTH Millets

Easily accessible and affordable, millets are making a comeback to Indian kitchens, says Shonali Muthalaly

Jowar, Bajra, Ragi. High school geography has ensured you can reel off the names. However, do you know the rest of India's millet family: Kodo Millet (Kodon), Foxtail Millet (Kakum), Little Millet (Kutki), Proso Millet (Barri) and Barnyard Millet (Sanwe). In addition to Sorghum (Jowar), Pearl Millet (Bajra) and Finger Millet (Ragi), that's eight in all. Meet the millets that could save your lives.

In a country wracked by lifestyle diseases, millets are a powerhouse of easily accessible, affordable nutrition. A rich source of minerals (calcium, iron, manganese, phosphorus and magnesium), they're high fibre, low fat and gluten-free. Their low glycemic index makes them ideal for diabetics. They lower cardiovascular diseases, bring down the incidence of colon cancer and enhance the body's resistance to chronic diseases.

Four decades ago, millets were India's staple food. Now, they're being replaced by rice and wheat to an extent that people have forgotten how to incorporate them into their daily diet.

"Millets have much more calcium, protein and iron than rice and wheat," says Sandeep Kandicuppa (programme coordinator of the Deccan Development Society which runs the Millet Network of India) explaining why he's a passionate supporter of the crop. "Now they're slowly being re-introduced into the urban scenario, as millet flakes, millet noodles, breakfast foods. Unfortunately in rural areas they have been sidelined — the current generation has forgotten how to cook them — ever since the public distribution system began offering rice and wheat for Re. 1 (in Tamil Nadu it's free of cost)." In the last four decades of the Green Revolution, Kandicuppa says several million hectares of area that was under millets have been lost, costing the nation many million tons of these grains and compromising the food security of millions of poor households.

Reviving sustainable agriculture

The Millet Network of India (MINI) unites civil society groups working on reviving traditional, sustainable systems of agriculture. "We have been working with women in the Medak district, Andhra Pradesh, for 25 years, training them to process millets, revive land, and market surplus seed."

"Millets are suited for a harsher climate," he states, explaining why they're an ideal way to feed India. "They need less water and no chemical inputs. Studies show a two degree increase in temperature can kill wheat. Rice releases methane — a green house gas. We are living in times of climate change: Under these circumstance millets are one answer, one very solid answer."

However, despite being a powerhouse of nutrition, millets are catching on disconcertingly slowly. "Rice polishes in one or two efforts. Millets take an effort to process and cook," says Kandicuppa. "Also, because of the predominance of rice and wheat, the transfer of knowledge from the previous generation did not take place, so people don't know how to cook them anymore."

Nevertheless, thanks to the many resources online, and organic shops sprouting in every city, it's not difficult to add them to your daily menu. Dinesh Kumar's practical, informative website <http://millets.wordpress.com/> is a great place to start. It lists an astonishing range of recipes, ragi orange cake, foxtail millet pesarattu, kodo millet mango

rice, little millet kichdi and pearl millet rotis.

Kumar's a founder member of the Timbaktu Collective, a registered voluntary organisation initiated in 1990 by activists interested in developing alternative models of sustainable development in drought-prone Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh.

Powerhouse of nutrition

Explaining why millets are as good for the country as they are for your health, he says, "You need 5,000 litres of water for 1 kilo of paddy. Millets require less than one fifth of that. They are the best option since they have minimal requirements, need no pesticides and can grow in multiple soil conditions. With their extensive root systems they improve soil fertility and thrive in stressful conditions."

In the Thar desert, for example. "They have 100 millimetres of rainfall in one year. This is one of the country's poorest soils, yet pearl millets sustain people here." Millets are the hardiest highest yielder in low input agriculture. "India's eight different millets produce fodder for cattle and rich food grains for people. They have a long lasting shelf life and are not affected by pests. They drought proof the country."

When Kumar first moved to Anantapur, he says a lot more people cooked with millets. "Within 10 years they stopped because rice and wheat were so cheap via the Public Distribution system." He adds, "Polished paddy rice is one of the worst foods one can think of. It's one of the reasons we have the largest diabetic population in the world. Millets, on the other hand, are complex carbohydrates, providing people with slow digesting, normalising sugar."

Despite the efforts being made, he says progress is slow. "We are developing seeds, influencing farmers, and trying to make millets available in the market in whole grain form. They are Nature's gift to humanity, so we don't want to over process them into a starch."

To make a difference, he says, they need to influence Government policy and reach many more people. "I'm just back from Bengaluru where we had a four-day millet mela. There was a great response: we sold millet laddo, muruku... People are showing more interest. However, it's not enough."

Compare nutrition:

Ragi, Rice & Milk:

100 gm Sprouted Ragi Flour: 350 mg of calcium, 4 mg of iron and 8 mg of protein.

100 gm rice: 28 mg of calcium, 0.8 mg of iron and 7 mg of protein.

Same amount of milk: 115 mg of calcium, 0.1 mg of iron and 3.5 mg of protein.

Ragi buttermilk

1 tbsp Ragi flour

1 cup Water

1/2 cup Buttermilk, Salt to taste

Bring the water to a boil. Mix ragi flour in cool water.

Add to boiling water. Stir well to remove lumps. Simmer till the mixture thickens.

Once it cools completely add salt and buttermilk. Mix thoroughly.

This cooling drink, rich in protien, calcium and iron is ideal for a hot summer day.

Keywords: [millets](#), [nutrition](#), [nutritious food](#), [millet mela](#), [Millet Network of India](#)



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