

## Re-Starring *Millet*s

From replacing rice and wheat to becoming stars of evolved dining, millets are slowly ruling the new dining space courtesy some of India's finest culinary minds.

Words: MADHULIKA DASH

A few years ago, when Chef Glyston Gracias (City Chef, Social) began experimenting with millets, the idea wasn't just to be a part of the millet fad that had swept the city but for a deeper know-how of the ancient produce. Millets are among the few food groups that not only find mention in the *Rig Veda* but have also been consumed in all their varieties since the Indus Valley Civilisation. Millet was such an integral part of the Indian culinary ecosystem that the famous voyager Columbus took samplings and seeds

back to the West and introduced it there as power food.

Chef Gracias recalls the seasoned culinary hand, "The good thing about millet is that it is still in use from kuttu ka paratha to ragi halwa, breads to puttu and pilafs. In fact, what is even more interesting is that not only are they an integral part of the culinary system across India, there is a variety for each season and region."

### Reworking with Millets

A year into experimenting with millets, which had caught the fancy of culinary



legends like Chef Manish Mehrotra (Corporate Chef, Indian Accent), who used it to present his version of the iconic Laal Maas to London and Chef Nimish Bhatia (owner, Nimisserie) who created the mixed millet khichdi as an ode to his years in Bengaluru, Chef Gracias began reworking the millet into his European menu. "It was an eye-opener how millets naturally up the quotient of the dish, especially that of a risotto. It adds this natural velvetiness that makes it a far interesting dish, virtually negating the need for extra flavourant," recalls the clean eating advocate, who uses millets also in making pasta for most of the dishes.

Adds Chef Mir Zafar Ali (Executive Chef, The Leela Palace, Bengaluru), "The taste and the fact that it is extremely filling comes as an added bonus." Chef Ali, who uses kodo millet across different restaurant menus in the hotel, first discovered millet during a family trip to Nagore. "I was introduced not only to Kodo millet (which is an all-season millet in the south) but to another super-ingredient called Mudakattan Keerai, a Balloon Vine Leaf that adds a different dimension to food, especially millet." While dining there, at a small restaurant that transformed these

two ingredients into a feast, Chef Ali decided to explore kodo millet, not only as an alternative ingredient but also an interesting dish. Today, adds the innovative mind, "it is offered as a new dish that weaves together ancient wisdom with new techniques." One of the most amazing ways to have millets, says Chef Anand Panwar (Executive Pastry Chef, Roseate Hotel & Resort), "is in salad. In fact, it goes great with fresh, parboiled seasonal vegetables especially greens with a honey, tamarind dressing."

Chef Vikas Seth's (Culinary Director, Sanchez) tryst with millet much like Culinary Custodian Chef Sabyasachi Gorai (Owner, Fabrica By Saby) began as a search for healthier alternatives for guests looking for condition-conducive ingredients. For diabetes and allergies, says the multi-cuisine expert, "it was more of a replacement for a certain rice, wheat and all-purpose flour in a dish."

### **Millets re-invented**

Often, adds Chef Gorai, "It was either a pilaf or a khichdi that was made from these grains to suit the purpose." But that changed in the past three years. "Chefs have discovered the beauty of



## *Did You Know?*



Kodo millets closely resemble rice. They are easy to digest and rich in anti-oxidants. They are not only good for weight-loss but also reduce knee and joint pain.



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going regional and seasonal by picking millet varieties that are more conducive to work around with," says Chef Seth. A fine example is the tacos that the chefs prepare using ragi, amaranth and barnyard millet. Fascinatingly, it isn't just the base that is changed but also the filling. Chef Seth, for instance, serves his tacos with a dressing made of yam and sour cream; while Chef Gorai's version is stuffed with millet falafels and hummus.

Another interesting way of having millets is with traditional curries, says Chef Akshraj Jodha (Executive Chef, ITC Windsor, Bengaluru), who uses millets to introduce a rustic taste when he recreates some of the old Rajasthani recipes like Hara Maas or even Khad Gosht. "Millets hold moisture much better and make for an interesting pair with thick curried meat dishes."

Chef Kinny (Culinary Director, St Regis, Mumbai), another advocate

of clean eating has used millets to un-junk quite a few dishes so that people can have healthier burgers. Says Chef Kinny, "Air popped millets are great for texture, they also make a lighter indulgence yet satiating."

### Here to Stay

Thankfully what has helped most chefs create so many versions of the superfood is the understanding of how each millet works in different region. Chef Gorai adds, "chefs are now using it to create dishes rather than just using it as a healthier alternative to popular ingredients like wheat and rice." An excellent example of this is Chef Gorai's signature yellow pumpkin-millet porridge, which is a great option for those with diabetes and dairy allergy. Clearly millets are no more the fad, but the future of culinary sustainability that must be constantly revived and reinvented. 