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The Rise of Millet: Celebrating the International Year of Millet and Its Global Impact

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SUMMARY

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in global food trends, with increasing emphasis on sustainable and nutritious alternatives to traditional staples. One such grain that has captured the attention of health-conscious consumers and sustainability advocates alike is millet. Recognizing its immense potential, the United Nations declared 2023 as the International Year of Millet, providing a platform to celebrate its rise and highlight its significant global impact. Millet, a group of small-seeded grasses, has been cultivated for thousands of years and holds a prominent place in the agricultural practices of many regions across the world. Originally grown in Africa and Asia, millet has gradually gained popularity worldwide due to its remarkable nutritional qualities and adaptability to diverse climatic conditions. It is a gluten-free grain rich in essential nutrients, including dietary fibre, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Its high antioxidant content and low glycemic index make it an excellent choice for maintaining a healthy diet and preventing chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disorders.

INTRODUCTION

The International Year of Millet aims to raise awareness about the numerous benefits associated with this versatile grain and promote its consumption as part of a sustainable and nutritious global food system. Millet stands out as an environmentally friendly crop due to its remarkable resilience in adverse conditions. It requires minimal water and can thrive in arid and semi-arid regions where other grains struggle to survive. Millet's ability to withstand drought, heat, and poor soil quality makes it an ideal choice for farmers facing climate change-related challenges, contributing to enhanced food security and resilience in vulnerable communities. The International Year of Millet provides an opportunity to recognize the cultural significance of this grain in various societies around the world. Millet has been an integral part of traditional diets and culinary traditions in many regions, forming the basis for diverse dishes, beverages, and baked goods. From millet porridge in Africa to rotis made with millet flour in India, this grain holds deep-rooted cultural and historical value. Celebrating millet allows for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride and identity among communities.

The rise of millet on the global stage has also sparked innovation and entrepreneurship in the food industry. As consumer demand for millet-based products grows, food manufacturers have been exploring creative ways to incorporate this grain into a wide range of products. Millet flour can be used as a gluten-free alternative in baking, while millet grains can be included in cereals, snack bars, and even plant-based meat substitutes. The versatility of millet opens up new avenues for culinary experimentation and product development, creating opportunities for small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs to participate in the emerging millet value chain.

What is the International Year of Millets?

India's proposal for the International Year of Millets (IYM2023) went through a series of internal approvals before being presented at the United Nations General Assembly, where it garnered support from 71 countries. India holds the Chair position, while Nigeria and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) serve as Vice-Chairs of the International Committee for the International Year of Millets under the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).The main objective of the IYM2023 is to consolidate and promote global cooperation in advancing the cause of millets. The initiative aims to raise awareness about the significance of millets through various means and encourages their integration into diverse sectors. By facilitating collaboration among different stakeholders, the IYM2023 seeks to harness the potential of millets for sustainable development and enhance food security worldwide.

Why is 2023 the International Year of Millets? What do we achieve by celebrating such years?

Millets, resilient dryland crops cultivated in Asian and African nations, have been garnering increasing recognition for their exceptional nutritional qualities. In a bid to shed light on these grains, the United Nations has designated 2023 as the International Year of Millets. Events like these serve as crucial platforms to draw attention to lesser-known subjects, in this instance, highlighting the significance of crops such as millets. They also foster a global exchange of ideas, encourage research and development, and contribute to the strengthening of trade relations.

Following the International Year of Quinoa in 2013, the nutritious superfood gained widespread popularity and is now cultivated across the globe. However, researchers caution that the sudden surge in demand had both positive and negative consequences. While farmers benefited from the increased market demand, it also led to a boom-and-bust cycle. Similar concerns have been raised regarding the potential fate of millets. In February 2023, during the announcement of the Union Budget in India, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman referred to millets as "shri anna," highlighting their superior nutritional qualities and positioning them as the finest grain. This rebranding of millets is significant, given that they were previously derogatorily referred to as the "poor man's grain" and were listed as neglected and underutilized crops not long ago. Sitharaman also pledged government funding for the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) based in Hyderabad, which was established in 1958. Although the exact amount of funding remains unspecified, Sitharaman expressed her intent to transform IIMR into a center of excellence and a global hub for millet research and development.

With the designation of 2023 as the International Year of Millets and the governments renewed focus on research and development, there is growing optimism for the revitalization and sustainable growth of millet cultivation. By harnessing the potential of millets, both as a nutrient-rich crop and a means to enhance agricultural resilience, nations can address challenges such as food security, climate change, and nutrition-related issues.

What are millets? Why are they suddenly popular?

Millet encompasses various types of small-seeded grasses cultivated primarily as grain crops. Notable varieties include pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi), and sorghum (jowar), with pearl millet being the most widely produced millet globally. Additional minor millets include foxtail, barnyard, proso, and others. These resilient crops are typically grown in arid and marginal lands across Asia and Africa, with India holding the title of the world's largest millet producer. The recent surge in global interest surrounding this coarse grain can be attributed to a significant event in March 2021. During the 75th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, the year 2023 was officially designated as the International Year of Millets (IYM2023). This

declaration aimed to highlight the importance of millets on a global scale and raise awareness about their numerous benefits.

According to Jacqueline Hughes, the Director General of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), millets have gained recognition as "future crops" due to the growing awareness of climate change's detrimental effects. In December 2022, ICRISAT led the technical session at the launch of IYM2023, which took place at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters in Rome. The institute also recently hosted a global conference focusing on the transformations of drylands.

As the International Year of Millets approaches, it provides a unique opportunity to shed light on these resilient grains and their potential to address global challenges. Millets' ability to thrive in harsh environments, their nutritional benefits, and their capacity to promote sustainable farming practices make them a crucial component of building resilient food systems. By emphasizing the significance of millets, the international community can foster agricultural diversity, improve food security, and mitigate the impacts of climate change, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and resilient future.

What's after the IYM 2023?

Nutrihub, an incubator based at the Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR), has provided support to more than 500 entrepreneurs and companies, focusing on areas such as post-harvest technology and value-added millet products. Meanwhile, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) has collaborated with harvest Plus to develop biofortified millet varieties with enhanced iron and zinc content. In India, the popularity of millets has grown significantly. Restaurants across the country now serve various millet-based dishes, while well-established brands like Tata have introduced a range of millet products under the brand name Soulfull. Additionally, public sector canteens have also started incorporating millets into their menus.

Some Indian states, including Karnataka and Odisha, have actively promoted millets and have even included them in government-sponsored mid-day meal programs. The influence of millets has extended beyond India's borders as well. The Indian embassy in China organized a series of events where diplomats gathered to discuss and enjoy millet-based meals, as reported by the Economic Times. Overall, these developments highlight the growing recognition of millets as a nutritious and sustainable food source, both within India and internationally. The support provided by organizations like Nutrihub and the efforts made by various sectors, including restaurants, brands, and government bodies, signify a positive shift towards embracing millets and their numerous benefits.

CONCLUSION

The International Year of Millets serves as a pivotal moment to recognize the significance of this resilient grain and its potential to address global challenges. Millets have gained widespread recognition for their exceptional nutritional qualities and adaptability to adverse conditions. The designation of 2023 as the International Year of Millets, along with the renewed focus on research and development, offers hope for the revitalization and sustainable growth of millet cultivation. By harnessing the potential of millets, nations can enhance agricultural resilience, address food security concerns, and combat the effects of climate change. The growing popularity of millets is evident through the emergence of millet-based products, the incorporation of millets in diverse cuisines, and the active promotion of millets by governments and international organizations.

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