

Sorghum products' brand from IIMR going places

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State-owned research organisation offering a wide range of foodstuffs under the brand 'Eatrite'

For any frequenter to the retail mall 'Big Bazar' in Hyderabad or Mumbai, it is difficult to miss the brand 'Eatrite'. It is probably the only brand that provides processed and semi-processed food products exclusively made of sorghum, and produced by a State-owned research organisation.

Launched by the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) — earlier the Directorate of Sorghum Research — 'Eatrite' encompasses a wide range of sorghum products one must have heard of only as made of rice, wheat or maize. Apart from sorghum flour and 'rawa', jowar vermicelli, jowar flakes, jowar pasta, jowar idli rawa, jowar roasted flakes, jowar dosa batter, jowar khichdi rawa, jowar ready idli mix and even jowar cookies/biscuits are marketed under the brand at a pocket-friendly price range of Rs. 15 to Rs. 50.

Eatrite is a brand laboriously built and marketed by IIMR, the arm of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research, solely for popularising millets as healthy food option.

One would be amazed by the research that went into developing sorghum cultivars suitable for making each of these products, customising available machinery for sorghum processing, and developing a value chain from scratch and marketing the product.

The exercise had begun seven years ago, when it was found that per capita consumption of millets in rural as well as urban areas was falling drastically over the decades. Processing inconvenience, lack of knowledge, and changing consumer preference were identified as major gaps in millet promotion.

Pilot project

A pilot project of developing a sorghum value chain from production to consumption was then initiated in PPP model, with funding from National Agricultural Innovation Project. National Institute of Nutrition, State Agricultural Universities and Central Food Technological Research Institute were roped in along with private partners such as ITC and Britannia.

Over 1,500 beneficiary farmers were supported in cultivation of 10 product-specific sorghum cultivars in 3,000 acres. Processes for 30 products were developed, and an equal number of processing machineries were retrofitted and standardised. Marketing interventions included extensive campaigns and advertisements through audio-visual media, informed B. Dayakar Rao, Principal Scientist and Principal Investigator, Centre of Excellence at the IIMR which houses the Value Addition and Food Processing Technology Park.

Set up three years ago with the goals of entrepreneurship development and commercial production, the Centre of Excellence now has the production capacity of 20,000 units annually amounting to 15 to 20 tonnes of Eatrite products. "If we include the technology licensees, the production may be said to be approximately 10 times of our current production," says Dr. Rao who is the brain behind the project.

Future plans include adding six more products to the existing nine, bringing in millets other than sorghum, scaling up of the production through an incubation centre, and expanding to NCR-Delhi. The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) approved funding to the tune of Rs.7.5 crore for establishment of the incubation centre with a semi-commercial plant, said Dr.Rao, and added that another proposal for brand franchising is under consideration.

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