

Natural Way Out

:: Anoothi Vishal

This winter, the uncomely kamal kakdi (lotus stem) seems to be enjoying its moment under the Delhi sun. It's selling for ₹90 per kg at a stall not too far from the Yamuna, one morning as I go scouting for local, seasonal vegetables. The vegetable vendor is adamant he cannot bring down the price. "That's what you charge for mushrooms, not some vegetable no one buys," I try to negotiate. "You don't know," he says, "people in apartments buy a lot of it these days."

This is not an isolated instance. Vegetables, grain and spices that had once been a part of traditional diets but disappeared from urban kitchens with the globalisation of the palate are now trending in a mass way. From millets to bathua, jhakia (a pahari spice) to lal saag, interest in local ingredients, organic produce and sustainable dining is at a high. What began as an exclusive, niche idea in restaurants in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru is now going mass. The way middle-India is consuming food is being changed forever.

Local Superfoods

Lucknow-based Organic India is perhaps best placed to trace this changing mass behaviour. Its teas are the most visible brands in the "clean indigenous" category even on shelves of kirana stores. "When we began in 1996, the first 10-15 years were really tough. But in the last 2-3 years, the market for such foods has really exploded. There is awareness and demand not just in big cities but smaller tier II and III cities too," says Abhinandan Dhone, MD & CEO, Organic India. The company with a presence in 25,000 outlets is poised to double it to 50,000 outlets in one year.

This large-scale democratisation is also reflected on restaurant menus. The earlier logic that consumers don't like "healthy" menus has been thrown out. Today, every restaurant worth its salt is peddling local superfoods, catering to a demand for the exotic and healthy. The quinoa phenomenon (where everyone had a quinoa salad on their menu) is turning into a fad for local ingredients, with chefs vying with each other to put the most exclusive regional ingredient on menus. Kerala red rice and millet khichdis are the new quinoa!

"Super foods, organic, local produce, farm to fork are all snowballing into one big fad. In the West, the vegan, clean eating and non-GMO movement started the fad. As expected, it did not take too long to come here. While some conceptually real restaurants are there, others have started copying each other to stay 'in' and have marketing fuel," points out Mumbai-based blogger Nikhil Merchant of Nonchalant

Interest in organic produce, local ingredients and sustainable dining is at an all time high



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Gourmand.

A barometer of chicness for many restaurants today is how their menus have at least one dish with the latest local "it" ingredient. There are vehement social media discussions on "new" superfoods like moringa or "Indian truffles" (mushrooms from the mountains that have no relation with truffles but are a marketing term). It is not unknown for PR companies to pitch stories on "sorrel leaves are trending" and chefs are going to the handful of companies sourcing these ingredients with wishlists.

"There is such a demand for seabuckthorn from restaurants that perhaps we

1. Banyard-millet khichdi is a popular "healthy food" in many restaurants now;
2. Seabuckthorn is often used to make medicines;
3. Amaranth flour is a gluten-free and protein-rich flour;
4. Black rice is known to have high antioxidant properties
5. & 6. Kamal kakdi and bathua are the new superfoods

will get the pulp and market it (fresh berries are seasonal and need cold storage, but pulp can be made available all year round)," says Ishira Mehta of Crop Connect, the company that sources cleanly grown foods directly from farmers.

Seabuckthorn was initially used by chef Prateek Sadhu of Masque, Mumbai.

Since the restaurant has been garnering so much acclaim, the ingredient clearly has caught the fancy of a me-too market.

Supply & Demand

Chefs like Sadhu, Thomas Zacharias of The Bombay Canteen, Abhishek Gupta of the Leela Gurugram and Vipul Gupta of Annamaya have gone beyond the superficial to create food that has both a story to tell as well as is delicious. "Whenever I get a new ingredient, I do proper research before zeroing in on what tastes best," says Vipul Gupta, director culinary operations Annamaya. Gupta's forte is his grounding in Indian regional cuisines and intrinsic understanding of flavours. He feels customers appreciate "new" ingredients but in familiar dishes. An example is the banyard millet biryani he has created.

Despite their growing appeal, however, restaurants find it hard to work exclusively with local, seasonal and organic ingredients because of issues of consistent supply, larger volumes and seasonality. There are just a handful of people at the moment bringing regional, forgotten, clean ingredients to our tables. Farmers like Sneh Yadav of Tijara Organic Farm in Rajasthan, Achintya Anand of Krishi Cress (mentored by the Olive group and Indian Accent's Manish Mehrotra initially), entrepreneurs like Ishira Mehta and Puneet Jhajharia of CropConnect (who the ET Magazine was the first to introduce) and I Say Organic's Ashmeet Kapoor are people behind the big change. "When we started two years ago, we didn't know what to expect but now we have people reaching out to us on their own and chefs are even replacing imported products with local ones supplied by us—millets instead of couscous and timur instead of Schezwan pepper," says Mehta, whose sales have been growing 100% every quarter.

Tijara Farm that used to grow only vegetables has got into grains and does 30 types of crops now. This year, they have planted millets on $\frac{3}{4}$ acre. However, even as business looks up, Yadav, a farmer's daughter, cautions: "It is great that people are now more open but it shouldn't be like in Peru, where quinoa became so heavily marketed that farmers themselves stopped eating it." She also cautions that traditional ingredients need to be studied in depth. In the end, the line between following a fad and genuine mindful eating is very thin indeed. ■



The writer looks at restaurants, food trends and culinary concepts