

It's the World's Hot New Superfood. The Snag: It 'Has No Taste.'

Narendra Modi came up with a pop song to get India to consume millet; diners consider—if bathed in butter

NEW DELHI—Prime Minister Narendra Modi spent the first half of 2023 working on a secret project: a song about millet.



The honored grain

The pop-rock [tune—performed by a Grammy Award winning singer](#) with a section featuring Modi speaking about the prosperity and [radiance of millet](#)—extols the virtues of an ancient grain that has been cultivated in Asia and Africa for thousands of years. Modi's government declared 2023 the Year of Millets, saying the grain could help alleviate world hunger, boost health and help [small farmers](#).

Restaurants are serving up creative recipes, and Bollywood starlets and celebrity chefs are popping up on social media to talk about the [health benefits of eating millet](#).

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co-founder Bill Gates even tried his hand at making a millet porridge during a visit in March. Government schools added millet dishes to free lunches served to students, and the grain is featured in the cafeterias at the Parliament of India. There's just one problem: "It still has no taste," said Mohdiq Ram, a self-described foodie.

Ram said he grew up hating his mother's spin on millet rotis, a flatbread common in Indian cuisine. After seeing this year's advertising blitz, the 25-year-old private tutor tried a few dishes at a New Delhi restaurant. He was disappointed.



Mohdiq Ram isn't a fan. PHOTO: SHAN LI/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Aanchal Sharma, 20, said she found millet rotis palatable only when bathed in clarified butter. "You gain weight unless you work out," the college student said. "People eat them and need to nap right away."

Despite the endorsement from India's top leader, some restaurateurs and chefs say they are struggling to persuade Indians who dismiss the grain as something eaten by the rural poor.

B. Rajesh Kumar Singh, executive sous chef at the swanky Taj Mahal hotel in New Delhi, said reactions from diners who order from the hotel's millet-only menus break down along generational lines.

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People over 40 enjoy millet because it reminds them of eating in villages with their grandparents, Singh said. Twenty- and 30-somethings, he said, are bewildered and put off.

"Things which are healthy are always less in terms of taste," he said. "But in the new culture, we always want things to be tasty, sweet, like eating a pizza."

Millet—there are multiple varieties—was a staple food for over half a billion people across Asia and Africa for centuries, according to India's Department of Science and Technology. India is the world's top grower of millet, accounting for 42% of global production, followed by Niger, China and Nigeria, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



ail millet in Assam, India, in June. PHOTO: ANUWAR HAZARIKA/ZUMA PRESS



Winnowing finger millet in January. PHOTO: MANJUNATH KIRAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES



n Rajasthan last year. PHOTO: T. NARAYAN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

But in recent decades, millet—a chewy grain with a slightly nutty flavor—has disappeared from diets in India as the government encouraged farmers to grow high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice.

Interest in millet has come back as climate change and political conflicts stress global food systems. Millet is a hardy crop that can survive even in areas blighted by drought and poor soil. The grain is rich in nutrients like calcium, iron and protein.

Falguni Shah, the musician who collaborated on Modi's song, said the 73-year-old leader suggested penning a song on the virtues of millet in December when they met following her Grammy award win for best children's album.

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“I didn’t even know he was a songwriter,” said the singer, who is known as Falu. “It was just a big surprise.”

The song “transcends from one soul to another, without even speaking,” she said.

The White House served the grain in June as part of a plant-based state dinner thrown for Modi, who is vegetarian. (Marinated millet and grilled corn kernel salad, and crisped millet cakes, according to the White House menu.)

Millet was on heavy rotation at the G-20 summit in New Delhi in September at official and private dinners. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his wife sampled millet pasta, millet mango tart and millet fudge brownies during their stay at the Lalit hotel during the summit, said Ravi Kant, the hotel’s executive chef.

“The face said ‘Wow!’” said Kant, who was told of the enthusiastic response by hotel butlers serving the prime minister. “They loved it.”

Kishida’s office didn’t respond to requests for comment.

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Millet evangelists such as Dr. Tara Satyavathi, director of the Indian Institute of Millets Research, said that people just need to be educated on the value of millet—and how to cook the varieties properly. Millet has no gluten and requires a good soak in water before cooking, she said.



et campaign in Hyderabad. PHOTO: PALLAVA BAGLA/GETTY IMAGES

The institute is working with startups to innovate products such as millet pastas and millet tortillas, she said. Big food companies such as

[Hindustan Unilever](#)

are peddling millet cookies and drinks.

Satyavathi said she has looked at quinoa's trajectory from humble farming food into global health superstar as a road map for her favorite grain. "Millet will be more popular than quinoa," she said.

Ram, the foodie in New Delhi, said he would stick to rice. "I like spices, I like salt, I like good cuisine," he said. "Millet tastes healthy, but not good."

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