

Miss Millet's food fest

**Times of India, 1 November 2009,
by Nandita Sengupta**

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-toi/view-from-venus/Miss-Millet's-food-fest/articleshow/5185029.cms>

CHANDIGARH: Robust women wielding long spoons expertly roast some 20 rotis on a black iron tawa atop a blazing chulha. Others forcefully knead yellow dough and slap rotis into perfect rounds. This strenuous work doesn't stop their robust banter. Meanwhile, hundred-loads of rotis are churned out in just a few hours.

This is no ordinary team. Neither are the rotis. The 15 women in the makeshift kitchen are farmers who came together for a food fest one lazy Sunday last month, indulging city-dwellers in the long-forgotten tastes of bajra, jowar, ragi, kangni and other millet in rotis and khichdi. The fest is called Bebe di Rasoi, and it's named after a millet-based recipe book.

It's part of a larger culinary battle by a small group of women - to bring millet back to the dinner table. The Bebe di Rasoi seems the ideal way to do so. Millet, small, hard and collectively called coarse grains, was once a staple of the Indian diet, but gradually fell off the food map when the focus shifted to growing, distributing and consuming rice and wheat. This, despite millet being naturally pest-free and very nutritious.

Andhra Pradesh-based P V Satheesh, head of India's millet network of farmers and state-level societies, explains, "With monoculture farming and the government in the 1960s buying only rice and wheat for the Public Distribution System, millet faded from mainstream agriculture."

But all is not lost. Impetus has been added to the return-to-millet campaign in the form of a young turbaned Sikh woman named Gagandeep Kaur. Beyond the tented kitchen, this vivacious woman flits between supervising cooking and hobnobbing with the massed throng, a kirpan glinting casually at her belt. A pair of stylish frames gives her a certain gravitas. It's no surprise when the 27-year-old tells you she was once a university lecturer.

Kaur has travelled the long road from teaching computer engineering to advocating millets at a considerable clip. Ever since the Ludhiana girl heard Krishi Virasat Mission's chief Umendra Dutt espouse the cause of millet, she's been sold on the idea. "We know about pesticide residue in food, the growing incidence of cancer. Medicine can't be the answer to health problems, what you eat is," she says.

She's derisive about New Age pill therapy. "Nowadays, beta-carotene is the in-thing but as supplements, in capsules. Why go for pills when bajra, ragi and jowar have so much nutritional value? Almost 90% women in Punjab are anaemic. They need a millet diet," declares Kaur.

Unsurprisingly, she is focused on re-acquainting people with the food habits of yore. "Millet is what Nanak Baba used to eat. Adding millet to crop mix brings in diversity and keeps the soil healthy," she says.

But Kaur found that it wasn't enough to tell farmers about the soil benefits of growing millet or the health advantages of eating it. "When the government doesn't procure, why would farmers grow it if they don't get a price for it?" she asks. Realizing that policy change was easier said than done, she decided to re-introduce a taste for millet by roping in ordinary village women. Her first step was to encourage women to start small kitchen gardens.

Within months, she introduced the women to the idea of cooking and serving millet. Most of the women were clueless, she found, and the older ones were able only vaguely to recall recipes. "Our first food fest had only 30 women," recalls Kaur. "Some got jowar laddus, others khichri. They exchanged recipes and tips. But the big moment was when the kids gave the thumbs-up." Soon enough, Kaur was writing *Bebe di Rasoi*, by the simple but arduous process of traveling through 10 villages for two months to collect recipes. Nine months on, Kaur spearheads a thriving movement to reclaim millet as a food staple.

It's a movement whose time has come, says Satheesh, whose NGO Deccan Development Society have monthlong interactions with farmers on organic farming. "Punjab's monoculture farming demanded lots of chemicals and plenty of water. As a result, the soil turns sterile. Climate change is now an added challenge," he says.

Wheat is a thermal-sensitive crop and global warming will ensure it 'disappears,' warns Satheesh. Further, rice fields with their stagnant water produce methane, a greenhouse gas. "Punjab has to rethink what it wants to do. One of the answers lies in millet. Plus, it was a part of the state's past," he says, noting 'tremendous interest' in Kaur's work among the urban middle-class.

They say the way to a man's heart is through the stomach. The piping hot bajre di khichdi, the fast-depleting piles of bajre and kodrey di roti, the exotic aroma of chibbran di chutney and generous helpings of makki da dalia may be testimony to this – as also the success of Kaur's strategy.