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Shining the Spotlight on Tubers
The sturdy and resilient crop

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By Bindu Gopal Rao



If one thinks of tubers most of us can probably name potatoes and yams but you probably have missed cassava, sweet potatoes, aroids like elephant foot yam, taro, and tannia, Chinese potato, arrowroot, yam bean, and more.

Why Tubers Matter

To bring attention back to these crops, **Spudnik Farms** recently organised a ‘Rooting for Tubers’ festival featuring indigenous root tuber crops and the resilient communities that cultivate them. The best part was that this saw the meeting of indigenous tuber-growing communities from Tripura, Meghalaya, Karnataka, Odisha, and Kerala, representatives from ICAR-CTCRI, MSMEs, Scientists, Academicians, and Professional Chefs who came together to share their thoughts. The day-long festival saw three panel discussions on sustainable traditions of indigenous communities, current innovations and challenges and navigating uncertainty to build a resilient future with tuber crops that saw spirited discussions around all things tubers. “From the perspective of nutrition and climate resilience tuber crops are one of the most underutilised crops today. Most indigenous communities who have a history of farming and growing have cultivated

tubers for generations. Over the years these communities have been marginalised as have these crops. There are several misconceptions around tubers and at Spudnik farms we have been supplying tubers to our customers in their vegetable subscription boxes. This has led to a lot of curiosity among them as they always ask us how they can cook with them as they recollect that their parents or grandmothers have cooked with them,” says **Sumeet Kaur**, CEO, Spudnik Farms Private Limited.

Varieties Galore

The idea of these kinds of events is to build awareness and make people more curious and aware and understand the diversity of the crops. “Urban population is aware of only 1 or 2 percent of the tuber crops that are available. There are more than 40 different varieties of tubers like the Kunbi Mudali, jhaad or Zaad Kanaga (*Plectranthus rotundifolius*), kasaraalu (a variant of Giant Elephant Ear Taro), dhava kona, kaate kanaga (*Dioscorea esculenta*), elephant foot yam, white yam and more, that are grown by Kunbi community a tribal farmers’ cluster in Joida, northern Karnataka,” says Kaur. Interestingly Spudnik farms has worked with chefs who have visited Joida as well. “My introduction to



tubers goes back to my childhood days when I remember eating elephant foot yam on some specific days. After I visited Joida with Spudnik Farms, the variety and array of possibilities of tubers and the different taste profiles had me intrigued. We use techniques from other cuisines to cook the tubers in different ways to showcase their textures and flavours. The yam cutlet for instance is an example of the same,” explains **Karan Upmanyu**, independent professional chef. **Nayantara Menon Bagla**, Chef, Nutrition & Lifestyle Coach explains, “Last year I visited Joida for the first time. As a chef you do not think you will find new ingredients. But at Joida, getting to know about tubers has been very interesting and tubers lend themselves to several interpretations.”

Farm Connect

The usage of tubers is quite extensive in the Northeast regions of India. Taro and cassava for instance are the primary crop in Manipur. The people in fact consume the whole plant of Taro and it is common to see Taro being dried in their kitchen on a wood frame which is located above the stove whose heat helps preserve it naturally. Elephant foot yam in Tripura and Cassava in Mizoram is also used as pig feed. In Meghalaya, boiled tubers are sold in vegetable markets like taro, cassava, and sweet potato. In Garo hills, taro grows in large quantities. While Taro diversity is seen in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh has several different coloured tubers. **Kennyson Lyngdoh**, Associate at Grassroot, an NGO in Meghalaya, says, “Sohphlang (*Flemingsiavestita*) is a tuber that we use locally to treat stomach ailments and menstrual issues. It is rich in phosphorus and protein and can grow without any fertiliser. Found in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, it is a less explored medicinal plant.” Likewise in Odisha, which has 62 scheduled tribes, has a famed biodiversity as far as tubers are concerned. “Sweet potato is a common tuber that binds people in Odisha. It is usually

consumed by being charred on coal. It is commonly used in temple food in Odisha and some variants are orange on the inside indicating that they have high beta carotene content,” explains **Sanjog Sahu**, Founder, **Mati Farms**, Odisha.

Food Security

Tubers are being hailed as the crops of the future as they require minimal resources, are better adapted to local growing conditions, and can withstand extreme climate changes. In the context of food security and climate change, tuber crops have a lot of potential as they are a source of nutrition for the lower socio-economic strata of society. As these are so diverse, there is more we can do by bringing these to the mainstream and readjust preconceived notions and educating people about the potential of these crops. For instance, in one hectare of land one can grow 35 tons of tapioca as compared to 3 to 4 tons of rice. “These are future smart crops and are also used as animal feed, industrial use and ensuring nutritional security. Scientists now have developed high nutrition variants of these tubers. Nutritional security of 220 million tribals in India is met through tubers,” avers **Dr. B. S. Sundaram**, Professor and Head of Division of Social Sciences, Regional Agriculture Research Station, at **Kerala Agricultural University**. So, the next time you look at tubers, make sure you change your focus and explore the myriad flavours of its magical world.

