

farming

HEALTHY NUTRITION Millet is a high protein grain with about 12 per cent proteins by weight. One cup of cooked millets contains six grams of proteins consisting of all varieties of essential amino acids including leucine. Studies have shown that high intake of leucine can slow down muscle degradation and help you build leaner muscle mass. Millet is also a good source of tryptophan. This amino acid can raise your serotonin level and helps with stress reduction. At night, a cup of millet porridge can be used as a therapy food to help you get a better night of sleep. [www.3fatchicks.com]



FINGER MILLET: FROM PURELY SUBSISTENCE TO COMMERCIAL

Robert Matsiko's love for millet has made him fight to improve the quality of the crop on the market. He has made it graduate from being a subsistence to a commercial crop

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Finger millet is an important food crop that has been grown on subsistence level in the western part of the country and plays a big role in cultural roles and values in the Banyankore community. Whenever there is a give-away ceremony and wedding, the grooms and bride's entourages have to be given fermented porridge (*Entakweca*) as a symbol of a long lasting relationship between the two families.

Often time and again, the elite class has been shunning the porridge with concerns over their poor quality (full of sand).

However as things stand, there has been a tremendous change in the quality of the millet flour now emerging on the market not only in the region but nationwide and beyond.

Thanks to the intervention of a young entrepreneur Robert Matsiko of Numa Feeds who has invested heavily in the millet before it gets to the market. He is determined to see millet products get onto the international market.

However, to achieve his dream, Matsiko first focused on how to improve on the millet bringing it from its cultural and subsistence value to a commercial crop. He says he perceived the idea when he went to Kampala and ate millet bread that contained stones.

"When I came back, I decided to improve on the quality of the millet flour because quality begins from the farmer," he says.

To achieve his goal, he started processing millet at a very small scale in 2007 in Itendero-Kabwohe town council. He began with two women workers who knew how to make millet bread to help him gauge the quality the locals want.

Started with 5,000kg, processing 800kg per month and increased with time.

He realised that the biggest hindrance was how he was going to get enough millet supply as people in the area lacked land and have con-

centrated on *matooke* as a cash crop.

In 2008, he mobilised farmers into groups and started by giving them farm implements and free millet seeds so that many could come on board.

"We gave them (farmers) hoes, millet seeds and an extension worker to teach them better methods of farming and also how to get good results from a small plot of land," he says.

The initial group Kyabandara Farmers Group comprising about 50 farmers started on a good note by producing eight tonnes in 2007. They moved to 15 tons the following year and now expect to produce about 30 tons.

Since then a kg of millet has moved from Shs 50-Shs 1200.

To achieve sand free millet, farmers are availed tarpaulins for drying on soft loans. This has improved tremendously on the quality of the millet and also easy storage as they are advised to winnow the millet from the chaff after harvesting.

So far seven farmers' groups with membership of about 1,500 have been formed in the greater Bushenyi and Mbarara Districts and have benefited from Numa feeds through trainings and sale of their produce.

A visit to Kyabandara group in Kibingo Sub-County shows how grateful the farmers are. They praise Matsiko whom they call Muzahura (saviour) because he has not only taught them how to earn a living from millet but he has also helped them move away from using grinding stones to grind flour.

"We call him Muzahura because he has not only raised the price of millet from Shs50-Shs 1200 but also trained us to have food security,



A lady winnowing millet. Winnowing is one of the methods used to ensure that the millet is free of dirt. FILE PHOTOS

improved the quality of life for women and popularised the growing of millet in the region," Jeninah Buhanda, the group's vice chairperson says. She credits Matsiko for organising them into a group that has benefited them financially.

"We have been taught how to save as a cooperative society, networking and how to use the money effectively," she says.

In order to have food security, the group members are taught to sell their millet in phases, every after four months.

To overcome land shortage, the groups have started hiring land from those that have big chunks and plant communally. This also helps in solving labour problems in that the group comes together during planting, weeding and harvesting time.

As a result, farmers have increased on production, incomes, food security, better methods of farming and bettered their lives. The factory has also created employment for the locals around and beyond. Millet has moved from being a subsistence crop to commercial and has

entered supermarkets big and small, far and wide for example Kenjoy supermarket in Kampala and Boma supermarket in Mbarara.

Frida Nanyonjo, 49, a widow and mother of six who started working with the company in 2002, attests that she has benefitted not only as a worker but also sells her produce to the company.

"I have been able to educate my children to university, built a house, bought six goats and supported my son who married recently," she says.

Other crops grown are cassava, *matooke*, fruit trees. Goat rearing is also another activity the farmers are involved in.

Matsiko says the sensitisation of farmers has tremendously improved farmers' incomes, nutrition and sanitation. It has also reduced the burden on women in the preparation of millet and brought it to the forefront among cash crops in the region.

He is indebted to African Development Foundation which has been at the forefront of farmer groups' legalisation and training.

2

THE NUMBER OF WOMEN WORKERS ROBERT MATSIKO STARTED HIS COMPANY WITH.


8

THE FIRST TONNES OF MILLET THAT HIS COMPANY FIRST PRODUCED


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