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India's exotic veggie basket has gone way beyond zucchinis and baby corn. Whether it's Parisian carrots, Peruvian peppers or purple corn, it's all grown in our backyard

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Photos Courtesy First Agro



SEED MONEY: There's a growing market for black tomatoes, purple corn, wasabi rocket and other new exotic produce

white sapote, four varieties of avocado, wasabi rocket, Jerusalem artichokes, and rhubarb.

Since a lot of this produce is not familiar to the industry yet, it gets abused, but there are also chefs who will take unfamiliar ingredients and use them in ways that fit into Indian staples.

Awareness levels are changing rapidly, according to Namita Jatia, director of Mumbai's The Farmhouse Company, a farm that retails baby kale, baby carrots, microgreens, oyster mushrooms, and Thai beetroot corn on Scootsy. "The big change from 2014 to 2015 was that I didn't need to do any marketing. People are contacting me on their own," she said.

Modekurti thinks the interest in these ingredients will continue to be led by the affluent travelling Indian who wants to eat well in India, housewives exposed to cooking shows, and five-star hotels opening in Tier 2 and 3 towns such as Raipur and Jharsuguda. Some of Modekurti's clients print his emails about his produce — which contain details of their taxonomy, nutrition information, as well as recipes — bind them, and use them as training manuals.

To predict which ingredients are likely to get most attention worldwide, it's best to look towards seed collectors and their catalogues. Gupta says the best ones are in US, Australia, China and Thailand. There are also seed collectors in India, who will feed the revival of disappearing regional varieties.

While supermarkets stock many of these products, they might soon become even more accessible. Last week, surrounded by baby corn and broccoli, I was chatting with the owner of Pick Point, run by an entrepreneurial bhajiwala in Colaba Market. I spoke to him about all the new produce I had been buying and said he'll need to up his game.

He promptly gave me his business card and asked me to introduce him to these farmers. ASAP. *Courtesy thedailypao.com*

I started with a photo from a farmer on WhatsApp. The second clue showed up while I was checking out food shops on delivery app Scootsy. The third was on an Instagram feed about a festival at a fancy foods supermarket in Mumbai's Lower Parel. Why was so much purple corn suddenly so easily available in the city?

I started calling farmers to find out more about this healthy flint corn variety loaded with 20% more protein than regular corn and a good dose of anthocyanin. It turned out that purple corn is not the only unusual produce that has become available lately.

Chefs and restaurateurs, and even us regular folk cooking at home, now have all of these and more to play with: baby kale, shishito peppers, black tomatoes, ancho chillies, white bird's eye chilli, yellow and black paprika, round Parisian carrots, wasabi rocket, komatsuna (or Japanese mustard spinach), blackberries, white sapote, watermelon radish, butterhead lettuce, shiso leaves, garlic chives, lavender, apple mint, fennel pollen.

None of them are imported. Thanks to our country's microclimates, they're all grown within India and many of them are harvested not far from Mumbai. So they're fresher, a third or fourth the price of imported produce, and their carbon footprint is way tinier. This also means we're likely to see them more frequently on restaurant menus and online food shops and at farmer's markets and grocery stores. The volumes produced are still relatively small compared to the romaines and zucchinis that make most of the money for farming businesses. Though the initial crop is small, their belief is that demand for these 'super exotic' varieties will explode in a couple of years, leading costs to drop, and the investment to pay off.

Of course, there is the argument that they aren't local or tra-

ditional. But here's the thing — much of what we consume and consider intrinsic to our food culture came from assimilating ingredients from around the world. It's common knowledge that chai came after tea, which came to us, via the British, from China. Rajma has its origins in the first beans found in Central Mexico and Guatemala in 7000 BC, which travelled with explorers to the Indian subcontinent in 1500 AD. The potato? Between 8000 BC and 5000 BC, the first domesticated varieties were found in south Peru and northwestern Bolivia. It made its way to India only four centuries ago, thanks to the Portuguese. Fenu-

gration. Now all it takes to bring a seed or a plant here is an internet connection, an online seed catalogue and a reliable courier service. For it to grow and flourish though, we'll always need farmers who give the seed or sipping the attention it needs. Finally, we need chefs and cooks who understand the ingredient.

The farmer who sent me an image of purple corn on WhatsApp is Nameet Modekurti, founder of First Agro, a pesticide-free

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greek, as the name implies, originally is Greek, as is our beloved coriander. Tamarind? Tropical East Africa. Ginger? South China.

For millennia, seeds, plants and animals have journeyed long distances thanks to trade, war, colonisation, marriages, and mi-

farm in Karnataka. His product list is a world tour via produce — there are Asian greens such as tatsoi and mizuna; South American chillies, including a vast Peruvian portfolio; Mediterranean herbs, and more.

I asked Modekurti what it

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