

Sorghum drinks bring new swig of success for Ugandan farmers

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Farmers drink busheera, a beverage brewed from sorghum, at a busheera bar in Bubaare, Uganda.
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BUBAARE, Uganda (Thomson Reuters Foundation) — Nkweiseki Macati scoops the froth from a bucket of chocolaty liquid, pours it into a

large metal cup and draws a swig. Then the local brewer from Ihangga village in Bubaare sub-country, southwestern Uganda, nods his head: the bushera is ready to serve.

Made from the cereal sorghum, bushera is a malted drink that can be consumed fresh as a soft drink or fermented into an alcoholic beverage known as amamera. And its growing popularity is providing a lifeline to farmers across Uganda.

After years of watching their maize and millet crops suffer in the unpredictable weather linked to climate change, Ugandan farmers are using new resilient, high-yielding varieties of the crop – and new demand for sorghum drinks – to boost their incomes.

Sorghum has been one of the nation's staple foods for thousands of years, but the reliable grain has traditionally been low yielding. Now a growing thirst for bushera and amamera, combined with new technologies and techniques for growing sorghum, is changing its attraction for farmers.

Sorghum is the third most important cereal crop in Uganda after maize and finger millet. The country produces annually over 370,000 metric tons of the grain, which is mainly used to make a stiff porridge called ugali or the drink bushera, also known as sweet porridge.

"Sorghum is generally recognised to be a resilient

crop, surviving under conditions of low soil fertility and drought, unlike most other crops," said Moses Tenywa, a professor of agricultural and environmental sciences at Makerere University in Uganda.

NEW POPULARITY

As weather extremes increase, and new varieties and techniques for growing and using sorghum are adopted however, the crop is increasingly moving into the limelight.

Macati, who runs a bushera bar that sells 700 liters of the drink a day at 20 cents a cup, is one of some 2,000 people belonging to the Bubaare Innovation Platform. The forum brings together farmers, researchers and manufacturers who deal with sorghum to find ways to make the cereal more lucrative.

One of the forum members is the Kachwekano Zonal Agricultural Research and Development Institute (KAZARDI), whose researchers have focused on improving traditional varieties of the grain. They now have created several versions of the cereal that mature earlier, grow better in drought conditions, and are more resistant to diseases.

"After we developed 20 varieties, farmers adopted three that are adaptable to the environment because they are early maturing, produce higher yields and can make better

porridge," Gaad Turyareeba, a senior research officer at KAZARDI, told Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Because the crops are very early maturing, the varieties can cope with drought and mature after six months compared to the local ones that mature at eight months. That got the farmers very excited," he said.

As science helps Ugandan farmers grow better sorghum, best practice allows them to get the most out of their crops.

Farmer Julius Atuheire, who also chairs the local Bubaare Innovation Platform, said that he and other farmers have switched from randomly scattering seed on fields "to using lines and spacing, better seeds and even applying fertiliser, which has increased our yields."

Using the new techniques, he now earns \$300 a year from sorghum, more than double what he used to get, he said. He said he has seen the market for sorghum flour growing.

In Bubaare sub-county alone, more than 500 farmers have doubled their production and income thanks to the rise in demand for sorghum, he said.

LONG-LIFE DRINK

The new markets for sorghum are in part of the

innovation group's own making. Looking for a way to commercialise the popular amamera drink, researchers from Makerere University came up with a non-alcoholic, high-energy version with a longer shelf life.

The drink is now available in shops around Uganda. Once it receives certification from the National Bureau of Standards, it could also be sold into international markets, researchers said.

"Farmers have a guaranteed market for sorghum because of drinks like (ours) and our strategy is to grow the business with the farmers by improving the production and quality of their crop," said Julius Hunter, production director of Huntex Industries, a drinks manufacturer that makes amamera under the brand name Mamera.

A study by the Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) indicates that commercialising amamera has increased income from sorghum production by an average of 80 percent for 5,000 farmers in Uganda.

Bubaare farmer Atuheire says sorghum farming is proving so profitable that in 2015 the local innovation platform will be transformed into a multipurpose cooperative, enabling it to run milling operations and marketing enterprises.

Already, members of the platform want to register a savings bank to access cheaper loans to help

them boost production and develop more value-adding innovations for the cereal, he said.

"Making and selling bushera has helped me support my family," said farmer and brewer Macati. "Sorghum is good business for me."

Busani Bafana is a journalist based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, who covers climate change and agriculture issues.

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