

Good Food is First Food. It is not junk food. It is the food that connects nature and nutrition with livelihoods. This food is good for our health; it comes from the rich biodiversity of our regions; it provides employment to people. Most importantly, cooking and eating it gives us pleasure.

In 2013, we had published the first edition of *First Food* series. I had written then that food is about culture and biodiversity. We often do not think that food diversity, indeed cultural diversity, is linked to the diversity in the biological world. We argued then that we must celebrate the knowledge of plants and their properties and how best to cook them to bring out the flavours and smells. We said then—and we are saying again now—that only when we value the biodiversity on our plates, will we be able to protect the biodiversity in the wild.

In 2017 came the second edition *First Food: Culture of Taste*. In this book, as in the first, we offered recipes of foods along with the knowledge of plant diversity. We did this because it was becoming clear the world was (and is) facing

an obesity pandemic—much of the food we eat today is bad for health, with no nutrition or goodness. More importantly, it is now clear that this change in our diet—moving away from home-cooked, nutritious foods borne out of culinary traditions and age-old knowledge—is not

Foreword

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incidental or accidental. We are children of the age of processed and factory-grown foods, who have been trans-mutated through a deliberate and subliminal marketing that has changed our habits and our culture of food.

We need a re-discovery of this knowledge of food and culture. All is not lost yet—we still eat home-cooked, bio-diverse and nutritious food. But this scenario is changing rapidly. Already, there is evidence that the incidence of diabetes—a disease with strong links to bad food—is increasing, not just among the affluent but also the poor of urban India.

Clearly, therefore, food is more than just about taste. It is about our health.

But the question is, how will we change this culture of bad food? Can we change it? The processed food industry is very powerful; its ability to reach people, particularly the young, with food propaganda is all-pervasive; it has perfected the art of seduction through colours, flavours and smells. It knows how to get us to snacking temptation—even when we know it is bad for us. More importantly, the processed food industry has now found a niche for



fitting into our busy lifestyles—its products are convenient because they are easy to get and make. No muss, no fuss.

This industry's world of food is all about business and profits, which is why it builds that flawless supply chain. The question is, can good food be supplied in the same manner? There is a thriving business based on good food—can this become a part of the mainstream food industry, or does it need a parallel market to survive? What will work?

This time, we bring you the knowledge of livelihoods that connects to *First Food*. It is about the business that is invisible and nascent, but one that must grow and take over our lives.

This does not mean that things are not changing. In the past few years, this food has been marketed successfully for its health benefits. Take quinoa—the grain of yesteryears from South America. Or *makhana* (*Euryale ferox*)—the seed of a member of the water-lily family. In 2013, we had not imagined that we would see *makhana* take over the snack market of our country. Please note that *makhana* has links with nature and livelihoods—the plant will only grow in lakes and ponds, which are crucial for our climate-risked future. We need these waterbodies to capture rain and recharge groundwater. Now, if the waterbody gets additional value from growing and harvesting *makhana*, it is more productive. Livelihoods of the poorest are connected to this harvest. Eat it; it is good for you. But do not let the market sell you the sweetened, salted or fried varieties—they are an oxymoron for good food.

But there is much more goodness out there that we must learn to include on our plates: foods that are part of our rich biodiversity and are protected by the communities whose habitat is the wilderness. These people—the First People—have put nutritive and cultural value to this food. What we don't often understand is the importance of this food to their livelihoods. *Chironji* (*Buchanania lanzan*) is a fruit that is gathered and collected by tribals of central India. The seed is sold and made into sweets. The value lies in the meagre price that is paid to the poor forest dweller for whom this is a crucial income. Why can't this food get a better value for them? Why can't we pay them a little more for this produce of the forest, so that the forest and the tree are valued?

I believe this will happen when we understand the value of this seed, bring it into our diet, and link it to the community whose livelihood comes from our food. In this edition of *First Food*, we bring you these stories—of trees and plants that make for nutritious meals and whose value we must learn to cherish. Of foraged foods from forests, wastelands and even roadsides, and foods cultivated by the poorest who get next to nothing for their labours. Sometimes (only sometimes), this food is sold at the price of gold—like

the morel (*Morchella esculenta*) from Jammu and Kashmir, which sell for ₹27,000 a kg. High value food from fragile ecosystems.

We have also explored the business of this food—how the tea industry is collaborating with small farmers to collect roselle flowers (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*); or how the jackfruit business is growing and its products are available through the year. These stories are important. They may not be enough today to change the pernicious addiction to bad food, but they tell us the ways of the future.

We know this is possible. Teff, a millet from Ethiopia (much like *sikiya* which finds a mention in this book), has cashed in on its gluten-free attribute. In Ethiopia, teff is grown by an estimated 6.3 million farmers, over 20 per cent of all cultivated land. This seed is being called Ethiopia’s “second gift to the world”, after coffee. In London, a kilogram of teff flour is available for as much as £7. In Ethiopia, it is less than half a pound for the same weight.

There are examples within India too. Millets like *ragi* and browntop millet are showing up on our food market shelves. We are consuming them because they are available. But this growth of good food has to be nurtured so that it becomes the flavour of our life.

The change-makers in this new business of food are the chefs. They lead the way on what is good food—they are the ones who must help shape this new connect between food, nutrition, nature and livelihoods. It is for this reason, in this third edition of *First Food*, we have invited these men and women of culinary fame to share their recipes with us.

This is about First Food, the food that will build a more sustainable food practice in our world. My colleagues and I hope these treasures—of recipes, knowledge of their origins, and links to communities that bring them to us—will help shape our culture of food and bring back the real flavours again. This fashion of food will be good for us.