The Ancient Queen of all Seeds: Ethiopian Sesame and the Humera Variety

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"My connection with sesame began after an injury in an elite unit in the Israeli army. I was looking for nutritious sources that could help me recover. While experimenting with various methods, I discovered that tahini, a sesame-based paste produced from premium Ethiopian sesame seeds, affects the functioning of the body, particularly the digestive system, and improves longevity. Hence, I decided to go to Ethiopia to explore and understand better the secrets of the plant, specifically learning about their distinct grinding methods and the unique Ethiopian sesame seeds.

I have worked with local farmers and producers for the past few years. Today, our business strives to realise the potential of the sesame by focusing on innovative solutions, both for the enhancement of the plant and the development of sesame-based products."

Various Health Benefits of Sesame

Sesame is an annual diploid species. It is one of the oldest oil crops in the world, documented since around 5,500 years ago in the Indian subcontinent. The plant and its seeds have unique and fascinating properties. First is a remarkably sophisticated and incredibly effective root system that knows how to extract liquids and other minerals from the soil. This mechanism accumulates valuable nutritious minerals in the seeds. It was remarkable to witness how the plant adapts to the particularly harsh environment in the hot arid areas in Ethiopia. Ethiopian sesame seeds are what we commonly call 'Super Food'. Among other benefits, sesame seeds are rich in antioxidants. Sesame consumption may reduce the risk of diabetes, heart disease, or other high cholesterol-related issues. It is rich in calcium and thus strengthens the bones. Sesame contains high amounts of Iron and may strengthen the central nervous system. Due to its high nutritious value, sesame and its products may increase energy and improve digestive processes.

Insights on Humera

Ethiopian sesame seeds have unique characteristics. Ethiopian sesame (Humera) seeds have a delightful taste and rich nutty aroma. Additionally, the Humera has large seeds; thus, besides having a mesmerising golden colour, the size of the seeds affects the production and effectiveness of sesame-based products. The Ethiopian sesame's biochemical properties, taste, and texture have unique prospects. It is particularly beneficial to work with for food development, especially tahini production and other nutritious and medical by-products.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Along with its many prospects, Ethiopian sesame growth, production, and trade are not free of challenges. One significant challenge is climate change and its effects on the growing areas. In many

African countries, including Ethiopia, the agricultural system is particularly susceptible to climate change. Extreme weather events and climatic conditions, such as rising temperature, drought, flood, and desertification, significantly impact agriculture, severely affecting sesame corps yields. This is on top of the already somewhat low agricultural output concerning the potential growth areas.

A second significant change concerns the harvesting and production processes. Some plant properties do not allow mechanical work in the growing and harvesting. Nonetheless, this challenge can be overcome and elevated. It was found that "a better understanding of the genetic variability underlying flowering date in sesame will serve as a basis for adapting sesame to new cropping systems. Moreover, it will enhance breeding efforts and enable turning this vital crop from domestically grown to global production in intensive agriculture" (BMC Plant Biology, 2021).

Finally, the trade and production of Humera sesame are also affected by a fluctuating market. Various reasons caused this market instability. Among others, in recent years, along with the growing demand for sesame, other sources have started to emerge, mainly the Sudanese of Gadaref sesame types, which are similar in their characteristics to the Humera sesame. This brought about a new source of supply and, thus, competition in an already complex and unstable market.

These challenges and many possibilities exemplify the need for collaboration of private and public sectors, particularly the local farmers and communities, as well as the involvement of research institutions in enhancing sesame production and sustainability. While acknowledging the challenges, one should bear in mind the enormous benefit, values, and potential of Humera sesame and Ethiopia's local farmers and business environment.