Cooking Show proves Smart Foods can be Tasty, Healthy, and Fun

Reality TV for a Cause is a new concept showing promise in Kenya. It is bringing Smart Food—food that is good for you, the planet, and the farmer—back into popularity. It is making eating millets, sorghum, and legumes like groundnut, green gram, cowpea, and pigeonpea exciting for eaters and cooks across the country. The first Smart Food TV Show has premiered—an innovative cooking competition created to promote awareness, consumption, and value chain development of nutritious, drought-resistant Smart Food grains in Kenya, supported by the International Crops Research Institute of the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT).

According to Christine Wangari, ICRISAT’s Smart Food coordinator for East and Southern Africa, ICRISAT created the Smart Food reality TV show to raise awareness, increase knowledge, and change popular attitudes about these Smart Food grains. The organization is working to rebrand them as “trendy, tasty, healthy, and fun.” Additionally, ICRISAT hopes the show will help “educate viewers on different trendy ways of preparing dishes from the cereals and legumes with the intention to get [people] to use them at home.”

To compete for the title of Smart Chef, ICRISAT selected nine contestants, including college students and young chefs. Judges challenged contestants to produce creative, delicious, and healthy Smart Food meals with little time to prepare. The first season’s champion, Esther Atieno, (pictured left), drew upon her catering, restaurant managing, and serving experience to design unique Smart Food dishes, including finger millet and green gram crepes, cowpeas and grilled rosemary duck, and sorghum and avocado bruschetta. Her winning meals won her a full scholarship to Strathmore University’s Professional Culinary Program in Nairobi, Kenya. Participating in the Smart Food Reality TV Show allowed Atieno to fulfill her lifelong dream of studying the culinary arts and pursuing a professional cooking career. After the show, Atieno was approached to cater events and create diabetes-friendly meal plans centered around Smart Foods. Atieno plans to use her winning experience to spread awareness about healthy foods and education about Smart Food meals, starting with her family.

Wangari says the TV show’s first season was a “tremendous success,” and even without a marketing budget, the show caught the attention of over 800,000 viewers. Wangari explains, “We received loads of emails from young people making enquiries about where to find the food products or thanking us for the program. We also received interest from media companies” and the private sector. However, Wangari plans to take a new approach in the next season. “The second season will be slightly different. We shall feature the farmers that grow these crops... we shall integrate both the rural and the urban feel... we shall work with influencers – the First Ladies of the selected counties. We also have some new games and strategies to keep the audiences hooked.”

After airing the show, a preliminary ICRISAT survey showed that Kenyan residents were buying and consuming more Smart Food grains. ICRISAT also surveyed local farmers, who saw an increase in sales for 5 out of the 7 Smart Food grains. The initial success of ICRISAT’s Smart Food Reality TV show suggests, according to Joanna Kane-Potaka, ICRISAT’s Director of External Relations and Strategic Marketing and Smart Food Executive Director, that innovative and entertaining approaches to healthy food education can engage, interest, and inform a wide range of people, both in Kenya and in other countries. Such initiatives can also make healthy food options more accessible.