

Popcorn maize a new favourite

By Tom Gwebayanga

At lunch time in Kamuli town, pupils from different primary schools descend upon the popcorn stall on Vithaldas Road, jostling to buy the snack. The vendor makes his young customers line up so they can be served with minimum struggle.

The customers happily walk back to their respective schools munching on the exploded kernels.

The availability of popcorn in towns across the country has been attributed to modern technologies, especially fabricated popcorn machines, powered by electricity or charcoal.

"With these machines, the popcorn business is thriving in both rural and urban centres," Charles Naaya, the agricultural officer for Butansi sub-county in Kamuli district, says.

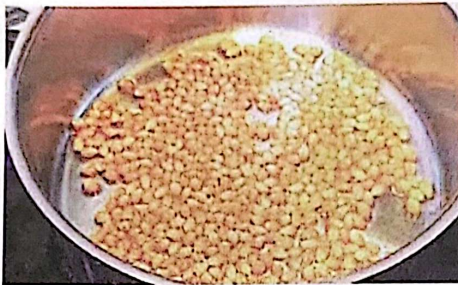
Locally known as *Katulika* (maize that pops) in Busoga, popcorn (*zea mays everta*) is the product of the maize variety with small-pointed, orange, white or black and yellow grains. Some species of the corn are cultivated specifically to be popped, while others are cultivated for flour/corn meal.

The machine, whose body sides are covered with glass, is mounted with a small pan in the middle. When heated with a little oil, the seeds pop.

The product is packed in polythene bags for sale.

Popular crop

Popcorn has always been a favourite at primary schools, outdoor events and at cinemas. Packets cost sh200



Popcorn maize is cooked with oil

to sh6,000, depending on the quantity.

Demand for popcorn grain

There are no clear figures of production, demand and supply of popcorn, since it is classified as maize, however the number of popcorn machines in each trading centre countrywide indicates that demand is high.

Naaya says owing to its popularity, strategic farmers are now growing the variety on a large scale.

Naaya says the price of a kilogramme of *katulika* doubles when that of other maize varieties drops.

According to Dismus Levi Gumula, a consultant at Arasha Institute of Agriculture and Technical Studies in Buyende district, popcorn maize is the way to go, given the gate price of sh1,200 to sh1,600 per kilogramme at harvest and scarcity times, respectively.

A survey around Jinja, Kamuli and Iganga towns



Popcorn maize is harvested after 120 days

shows that at the moment a kilo of *katulika* is between sh1,600 and sh1,800, as opposed to other varieties whose price is sh500 and sh700 per kilo.

Handling

According to Naaya, popcorn will pop when freshly harvested. He explains that kernels with a high moisture content are also susceptible to mould when stored.

"For these reasons, popcorn growers and distributors dry

the kernels until they reach the moisture level at which they expand the most," Naaya explains.

This differs by variety and conditions, but is generally in the range of 14-15% moisture by weight. If the kernels are over-dried, the expansion rate will suffer and the percentage of kernels that pop at all will decline. A farmer can use a moisture tester, which is sold in agri-input stores to gauge the moisture of the maize.

Popcorn varieties are broadly categorised by the shape of the kernels, the colour of the kernels or the shape of the popped corn.

While the kernels may come in a variety of colours, the popped corn is always off-yellow or white as it is only the hull (or pericarp) that is coloured.

Facts about popcorn

Popcorn is a variety of corn kernel, which expands and puffs up when heated. A popcorn kernel's strong hull contains the seed's hard, starchy endosperm with 14-20% moisture, which turns to steam as the kernel is heated.

Pressure from the steam continues to build until the hull ruptures, allowing the kernel to forcefully expand from 20 to 50 times its original size and finally cool.

Some strains of the corn are cultivated specifically as popping corns. The Zea mays variety is the most common of these.

The six major types of corn are dent corn, flint corn, pod corn, flour corn and sweet corn.

Tips HOW TO GROW POPCORN MAIZE

Charles Naaya, the agricultural officer for Butansi sub-county in Kamuli district, says unlike other varieties which need fertilisers, popcorn maize grows well on hard and rocky soils. He says it can be grown countrywide.

Moses Mutaka, a farmer and resident of Kasozl in Namasagali sub-county, Kamuli, who has grown the crop for five years, says spacing between rows is two feet and 1.5 feet from hole to hole.

Just like ordinary maize, a farmer weeds twice. The maize is ready for harvesting after 120 days. A farmer can have two seasons per year.

Mutaka says the yield is between 1.2

tonnes and 1.8 tonnes per acre. At a farm gate price of sh1,600, a farmer makes between sh1.9m and sh2.4m from an acre. Ordinary maize makes sh1m from an acre on average.

Across the globe, pop maize is a famine-fighting crop grown at subsistence and commercial levels for processing into flour and export. Being rich in vitamin A, B, starch and carbohydrates, popcorn boosts health in toddlers and adults.

Popcorn maize can also be milled into yellow flour and eaten as corn meal or porridge.



Popcorn is a popular snack

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